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SCISSORS CUT PAPER

THE MAN WHO LAUGHED

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BY

GERARD FAIRLIE

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CHAPTER I

ON a certain grey November morning the Rue de la Paix, that famous thoroughfare of Paris, presented a picture of animation which contrasted ill with the prevailing weather. The usual crowds, gaily dressed as always in the capital of France, thronged the pavements; the inevitable Citroens and Renaults rushed madly to and fro in the street. To the casual observer nothing out of the ordinary was to be observed, but actually there were happening at that moment two separate and unexpected meetings between two couples, which were destined to add yet another page in the records of the Paris Sûreté.

One of these meetings was between a woman and a man, the other between two men. On the right-hand side, proceeding down the street from the Place de l'Opéra, Victor Caryll met his friend Bill Wilson just beside the world-famed windows of Cartier, the famous jeweller. Practically opposite, a woman was engaged in staring into the windows of a fancy-leather shop, seemingly admiring the many handbags and odds and ends which clever fingers had fashioned from raw hide.

A man, tall, slim, and elegant, passed once behind her. For a few paces he went straight on; then, turning, he retraced his steps and came to a stop directly behind and close to her. Taking a cigarette from the case in his pocket, he lit it with a green match which he took from a gold match-case. Negligently—almost too negligently—he threw the spent match in front of the woman, almost directly at her feet.

For nearly a minute neither moved. Then the man strolled away. He had not covered ten paces before the woman followed. Keeping their interval, they walked as far as the Place Vendôme, where the man hailed a taxi.

This action was well timed, if done with a purpose, for as the man directed the driver the woman passed within easy earshot. The taxi drove off, the man within it. The woman continued her walk, stopping once or twice to look into shop windows, idly advancing again, ostensibly with no more object in view than to take a little exercise and enjoy the fresh air.

Meanwhile, the meeting between Victor Caryll and Bill Wilson had been characteristic.

At first Wilson had not seen Caryll, and he had almost passed him when a resounding slap on the back had temporarily unbalanced the poise of his bowler hat.

He turned round sharply.

"Going to cut me, eh?" the old familiar high-pitched laugh rang out, and was lost in the noise of the traffic.

"Great heavens, it's Vic!"

"No other. What a bit of luck, old bird! I was

just getting dusty about the throat. A good, old-fashioned potion would do me a power of good. What say you to a visit to my old friend Harry, just across the road there, and a minor celebration at his bar?"

Wilson laughed.

"You're just the same, Vic, and thank God for it! Of course I'm with you."

"Good! And from your answer, you old reprobate, I'll wager you haven't altered appreciably either. Let us adjourn and lubricate the tonsils, after which we will have a talk."

The two men, arm in arm, crossed the Rue de la Paix and, walking a few yards down the Rue Daunou, turned into the bar to which Caryll had referred. A few moments later they were sitting together at a small table, a yellowish cocktail in front of each.

"Well?"

"Well?"

Both laughed. As is the way so often when old friends meet after a period of separation, there was a lot these two could say to each other, but neither knew where to begin.

There was a pause. Then:

"I give it up," said Caryll. "Now then, the stock question: What have you been doing with yourself?"

"Nothing very much," Wilson smiled. "Wandering around, fooling about generally. I've travelled a good bit, seen a lot of new places and new faces. And you?"

"A mixture of work and play."

Caryll's mouth closed rather abruptly as he said the last word. Wilson smiled to himself as he recognised

the old sign, which signified, he well knew, that any further questions would not be welcome and would certainly be evaded.

They talked. They talked as only two old friends can who really know each other and who have not seen each other for some time, picking up the threads where they were dropped and imparting information about mutual acquaintances. The time passed rapidly; suddenly Caryll looked at his wrist-watch and jumped up.

"Good Lord!" he cried, "nearly one o'clock. Lunching anywhere?"

"Yes," said Wilson, "lunching with a guest at Philippe's across the street. You're the guest."

Again Caryll laughed.

"Thanks, Bill," he said. "I've got an appointment at three, so that'll do splendidly. What about another for the road?"

Wilson smilingly agreed. Two more cocktails were brought and consumed, and the pair adjourned across the street and sat down to their lunch.

At about this time Wilson noticed that his friend was becoming preoccupied. He said nothing about it, knowing from long experience that, when thinking, Victor Caryll was not to be disturbed. He relapsed into silence, and devoted himself wholly to the excellent food before him, safe in the knowledge that, when the time was ripe, Caryll would speak. Signs were pointing to something being turned over in the active mind of his friend, something of importance, something which he had an uncanny feeling concerned himself. He

looked across the table once or twice—so strong was this presentiment—anxious to glean some inkling of what was occupying his friend's brain.

He obtained nothing by this glance, however. Victor Caryll was, apparently, absorbed only in his food. His face was inscrutable, his great bulk settled quite comfortably in his chair. But he was frowning, if ever so slightly, and to frown meant only one thing with Caryll: he was revolving something in his mind. Wilson's thoughts went back to a period in his life over two years ago. He saw himself once again in London, creeping into the house of his friend, Derek Sinclair, bent on the discovery of the significance of a revolver shot which he had just heard. His reminiscences took him on rapidly to the very natural assumption, on the part of the police, that he had been either drunk or mad, and, thankfully, to the faith which his friend Victor Caryll had shown in him; then on to the chase of the man they had christened Brain, a chase which had proved stern indeed. And all the while, as he turned these incidents over in his mind—incidents which had now lost most of their colour and had assumed the hazy character of some bad nightmare of long ago—he could not rid himself of the ever-recurring picture of a pale but beautiful face, of the persistent memory, which came floating out of the past, of his affection for Anne Sinclair, devoted wife of a ruthless and cruel criminal.

So lost was he in these thoughts, that Caryll's voice, suddenly questioning, took him by surprise.

"You told me, old man, that you had been travelling

about, wandering the face of the world since I last saw you?"

"Yes."

"Because of Anne?"

The question was brutal in its directness. Caryll knew that, and had put it bluntly with a purpose. The colour in the other's face, suddenly apparent and as suddenly gone, answered him better even than a monosyllabic reply.

"Yes."

Wilson had answered perfectly naturally, without any delay or hesitation. There was a momentary pause, Caryll evidently deep in thought, during which his friend realised that, coming from anyone else, the question which he had just answered so spontaneously would have annoyed him intensely and been considered by him an unwarrantable impertinence. He smiled to himself. Caryll evidently retained that wonderful power which he had known of old, the power of leadership among men, almost a sovereign sway over not only his friends, but also over all who came into contact with him.

"You will excuse me, Bill," said Caryll suddenly and seriously, "if I make a few personal remarks which, since they are for a purpose, I require you not to resent. Have you cured yourself?"

"Cured myself?"

"Yes. Of Anne."

There was a moment, but only a moment, in which the two men stared into each other's eyes, striving to learn what they might, each with his own object in view.

Then, abruptly, with almost a physical motion as if of throwing off a hindering cloak, Wilson answered:

"I am cured."

"Absolutely?"

"Completely."

Caryll smiled. It was the old smile, chiefly with the eyes, which Wilson knew to mean that his friend was really pleased, and not merely making a show out of policy or politeness. Caryll's next words confirmed him in this supposition.

"I am so glad, old chap. I always thought Anne was a tougher charmer than she appeared to us—to you."

Wilson made no reply. He shifted his eyes from his friend's face to the viands on his plate.

"Since you have now been—er—cured," said Caryll suddenly, "what are your immediate plans?"

"I'm just staying in Paris for a day or two, preparatory to returning to London."

"And when you get there?"

"I've got nothing in particular to do."

"I see. A loaf round?"

Wilson laughed.

"Not for me!" he said. "For a month or two, perhaps; just to get acclimatised once more, and to pick up the threads where I dropped them. But after that I intend to find something to do."

"That's the way to talk!" Caryll beamed at his friend. "A life of idleness is a life of mischief in nine cases out of ten, old cherub. By the way, about this promised acclimatising. Could you put it off, if necessary?"

"Of course."

Wilson looked at Victor Caryll closely. He realised well enough that these apparently disinterested questions were in all probability leading up to something, grave or gay he knew not, but almost certainly something of consequence. He realised also, almost with a shock, that the sense of presentiment, the feeling that something was to come of this chance meeting of his with Victor Caryll in the Rue de la Paix in Paris, was once again upon him and making itself felt with renewed vigour. Anxiously he waited for Caryll to speak.

But Vic was in no hurry. He had chosen a pear from the basket of fruit on the table in front of him, and having quartered it, was now in the act of peeling the pieces with meticulous care. His whole attitude of seeming concentration on his task, his large frame sprawling in the comfortable plush chair, both gave the impression only of a gourmand busy in the satisfaction of his stomach. Wilson could not see his eyes, and he well knew that only therein lay the clue to what was coming.

Suddenly Victor Caryll looked up. He looked directly at his friend, catching and holding his eyes in an intensive gaze.

"I want you to go and see Anne," he said. "I have an idea that the lady may be on the war-path again. There are two questions I particularly want you to get an answer to. Are you on?"

Just for a moment Wilson hesitated. Then looking up at his friend with a smile, he nodded.

CHAPTER II

THE chief of the Paris Sûreté, which, as all the world knows, is the French equivalent to our own Scotland Yard, was a man who, in appearance at all events, was as unlike the generally accepted theory of a Paris detective as a ploughman is unlike his horse.

Monsieur Dubonnet was small, on the fat side, going a little grey around the temples, and the wearer of a startlingly black and extremely minute moustache. From his appearance, he might have been one of many nationalities and of almost any profession; he could have passed muster—and in point of fact frequently did—as a Greek barrister, a Roumanian diplomat, a French business man, a German socialist, or, almost, an English tourist; but only from his appearance. It was a source of sorrow to the little man that he was forced, except when disguised as an Englishman, to be dumb, since he had not been favoured with the gift of tongues.

Monsieur Dubonnet, on this afternoon of late November, was expecting a visitor. He looked round his office, noting with his quick eyes that all was in order, that all was as he liked it. Dubonnet was proud of his office, and had a right to be. The walls were panelled in oak, the ceiling was beamed, and the furniture was comfortable and withal efficient. On a table in the cor-

ner a large bowl of scarlet flowers gave a touch of colour to the room.

With a sudden movement Dubonnet rose from his desk and crossed over to the flowers. He parted them, and smiled at a little black box which they effectively concealed. He knew by means of this box his secretary in the room next door would hear and take down in shorthand every word of the coming interview. He returned to his desk, casting a glance at the clock on the mantelpiece as he did so. He had still five minutes to wait before he could expect his visitor.

Pulling open a drawer, he withdrew from it a photograph. This he studied carefully, imprinting on his mind the features of the man whom in a few moments he was to see in the flesh. It was essential that there should be no mistake; the visitor whom he expected could be of very great assistance to him, but . . . Monsieur Dubonnet was very worried over certain incidents which had come to his notice in Paris, and he did not quite know the power or resources of those with whom he was about to wage what he already realised would be a relentless war.

There came a discreet knock at his door. A uniformed policeman entered, and announced:

"Monsieur Caryll."

"Ah!" said Dubonnet to himself.

He arose to meet his visitor, and very nearly sat down again in his astonishment, for an almost incredibly big and powerful man had just entered the room.

The man was smiling, and the smile was infectious. Monsieur Dubonnet smiled back.

"I am delighted to see you, Monsieur," he said, extending his hand.

Victor Caryll took it, and wrung it heartily. Monsieur Dubonnet winced, but, with true Gallic courtesy, retained the smile on his features.

"And I am equally delighted to have come, M. Dubonnet," said Caryll. "A visit to your beautiful city is always welcome, whether on business or not. I say, aren't I polite?"

Monsieur Dubonnet looked puzzled.

"Pardon, monsieur?"

"I was remarking," said Caryll, so quickly that even a skilled knowledge of the English language would scarcely have enabled Monsieur Dubonnnet to understand, "on the surprising phenomenon of an Englishman getting in the first word in pretty phrases when in conversational contact with a Frenchman."

"Have you any French, monsieur?" asked the bewildered Dubonnet.

"I have so little," said Caryll this time slowly and distinctly, "that what I possess pales into insignificance compared to what you own of English."

Monsieur Dubonnet laughed.

"You are a—a *farceur,* monsieur," he said, waving his guest towards a seat and resuming his own behind his desk. "Now, before we start, let us get the formalities behind us."

Caryll understood the implied meaning. He produced a passport and certain papers. Dubonnet gave them but a cursory glance, for he was already well satisfied from his guest's features that the man sitting

opposite him was indeed the Victor Caryll whom he had summoned from London to his room.

"Scotland Yard, they have told you why I requested the kindness of your presence?"

It was a different Monsieur Dubonnet who was speaking now. The formalities were over, the interview had begun. The little man who could be so genial, seem so inoffensive, had been replaced by an essentially business-like, brisk official, the man whose name was on everyone's lips in the *Apache* quarter of Paris, but only in a whisper.

Caryll, by whom few things passed unnoticed, appreciated the difference, and dropped any pretence at light-hearted word-play.

"Scotland Yard," he said, "gave me some idea. But the story they told me seemed, quite frankly, a trifle preposterous. I should be obliged if you would give me the whole story as it has really happened."

Dubonnet nodded. Quick, also, to appreciate cadences, he realised that the man opposite him was as business-like, on the occasion, as he himself was.

"My story," he said, "is, I am afraid, equally preposterous. That such a thing should happen, and go on happening, here in my beloved Paris of all places! But you shall hear. You shall judge for yourself. You shall see my difficulty. Shall I proceed?"

"If you please."

Monsieur Dubonnet proceeded. He told how, on an evening early in September of that year, a message had been received at the Sûreté that the daughter of one of the most wealthy residents of Paris had disappeared.

The father being extremely influential, this message had been brought straight to Monsieur Dubonnet himself. He had laughed! How he had laughed! An affair of the heart, most likely; just an elopement. The anxious father would, no doubt, receive information from the happy couple in the morning.

But five minutes later Monsieur Dubonnet had not laughed. A second message had come in, a message from an equally rich and influential person, stating that his daughter also had disappeared. For a moment Monsieur Dubonnet had been astonished at the extraordinary coincidence. But only for a moment, for then yet another message had come in. A third disappearance had occurred, this time of the daughter of a millionaire American, visiting Paris on his way through Europe.

At once, Monsieur Dubonnet had got busy. The three best brains among his subordinates in his department had been sent off with all speed to interview the respective parents and obtain information as to the known movements of the missing girls that day. But all three had come back practically empty-handed. True, they had all brought photographs and full descriptions of the ladies concerned. Finger-prints also had been obtained, in case of need, from articles of personal use which had been found in the girls' bedrooms. The girls had each gone out to shop in the morning and had not been heard of since. Then Monsieur Dubonnet had set about the question of elimination. All the police spies had been busy that night, wandering about the cafés and boulevards, sitting in the favourite haunts

of known *Apaches* in the hope of picking up shreds of conversation which might yield some clue on which to start operations. But this, usually a fruitful source of information, had failed, and failed dismally. Not a single report had come in which was in any way helpful or useful.

Monsieur Dubonnet had then had recourse to his second line of attack. Every café, every haunt of the *Apaches,* every known house of ill repute had been raided during the next seven days, and every nook and every cranny examined with the utmost care. Nothing had resulted from this to shed the smallest light on the mystery. The three girls remained as completely lost as any needle in a haystack.

About this time the inevitable charge of inefficiency —a charge deeply and naturally resented by any police force—began to be made against Monsieur Dubonnet and his staff by the three families which had lost their daughters. The American was first, and in an interview with the representative of an evening paper he had made the somewhat tactless remark that, if he had to lose his daughter anyway, he would surely have preferred that it should happen in "lil' ole Noo York," where he was at least certain that every attempt would be made by intelligent men to recover her. This did not go down well at the Paris Sûreté, but the police did not redouble their efforts as a result. This would have been impossible, since every known method was already in use to accomplish the desired end, and all the immense resources of the Sûreté had been conscripted.

The second, and even more disturbing complaint,

had come from a high official of the French Government. This man and his party relied very considerably for political funds on two rich supporters, in point of fact the two fathers of the missing French girls. This official had been perfectly polite on the telephone, but he had been very emphatic. He had announced that in his opinion a swift explanation of the mystery and recovery of the girls, preferably alive, but if that were impossible, then dead, would be to the best interests of France in general and certain officials of the Sûreté in particular. Again Monsieur Dubonnet had found it impossible to do more than he was already doing, for the very good reason that everything that could be done was actually being done.

Then came the bombshell. Each of the fathers of the missing girls received a letter. That letter pointed out that for the sum of one million francs, to be paid in a certain and rather peculiar manner, their daughters, hale and hearty, would be returned to them. In other words, the old system of capture and holding for ransom, as practised still in uncivilised parts of the world, had suddenly come to civilised Paris.

At this point Monsieur Dubonnet interrupted his narrative. From a drawer at his right hand he produced a sheet of pale green notepaper, which he handed across his desk to Caryll.

"That, monsieur," he said, "is one of the three letters. Will you please read it?"

Caryll took the letter and read it through. Then, turning to his host, he asked:

"Was this translated for me to read?"

"No, monsieur. That is one of the originals."

"To the American?"

"They were all the same."

"All written in English?"

"Yes."

Caryll looked once again at the sheet of notepaper in his hand. Slowly, very deliberately, he read it through aloud.

"Sir," he read, *"I am happy to be able to allay your present anxiety with regard to the disappearance of your daughter by informing you that she is at the moment in my custody, is perfectly well, and, in the circumstances, moderately happy. You will also be glad to hear that you may have her back within twenty-four hours, not one hair of her head polluted in any way, provided you agree to one small condition. I have been busy in the last few days obtaining an accurate estimate of your wealth. This leads me to suppose that the sum of one million francs is a fair price which you can afford to pay in exchange for the return of your daughter. You will not humble her, I hope, by disclaiming the correctness of my estimate as to her value to you and your wife; while I, on my part, am not prepared to do any bargaining of any sort or description whatsoever.*

"In these circumstances, I must suggest to you that the sooner this little matter is settled, the better for all concerned. The instructions as to the method of handing over the money are very simple, and are appended.

"I have the honour to be
"One of your very obedient servants."

Caryll looked up at Dubonnet interrogatively.

"Ah! the appendage," said the little man, and he quickly passed over a second sheet of notepaper.

This Caryll unfolded and read, again aloud:

"Instructions for the exchange of one girl (American) and one million francs (French).

"1. *The father of the said girl will provide himself with the sum of one million francs in notes.*

"2. *He will proceed, quite alone, on foot, to the Bois de Boulogne, to a spot marked with a cross on the accompanying map.*

"3. *He will so arrange his time of departure from wherever he may be as to arrive at this meeting-place at the hour of eleven p.m. exactly.*

"4. *He will wait at this meeting-place until requested to hand over the notes by a lady of about the same height as himself; whereupon he must leave the Bois as rapidly as possible on foot. Once outside the Bois he may proceed home by any means which may appeal to him. He will find his daughter already at home when he reaches it.*

"5. *Should the police be notified, and attempt to interfere, then action will be taken against* (a) *the young lady at present in custody,* (b)

the gentleman bearing the notes, and (c) *the police.*

"6. *As the previous paragraph cannot be over-emphasised, kindly note that by action is meant retaliation of a swift and brutal nature, against* (a) *your daughter,* (b) *yourself, and* (c) *a gentleman at the Paris Sûreté who answers to the name of Dubonnet.*"

Caryll's voice ceased on a slightly muffled note. Monsieur Dubonnet, who had been examining his fingernails during the recital, looked up sharply. He was amazed to see the whole great bulk of his guest shaking silently, the features slightly contorted. He jumped up.

"Monsieur, are you ill?"

Caryll could contain himself no longer. The suppressed laughter, which had been muffled to that moment and instigated by the extraordinary narrative which he had just perused, suddenly burst its bounds. Victor Caryll lay back in his chair, waved his hands in a helpless and half-apologetic manner, and gave himself up to laughter.

Dubonnet sat down again abruptly. He flattered himself that he knew the mad English better than most Frenchmen, and he waited patiently for the spasm to pass. Strange things, he told himself, excited a Briton's laughter, and did not impair his efficiency. Dubonnet resumed the examination of his fingernails.

A final gurgle from the chair opposite made him

look up. Caryll was wiping the tears from his eyes with his handkerchief.

"I say!" said Caryll, suddenly recovered. "This fellow is an artist! What a letter!"

"Yes, monsieur. You have spoken well! What a letter! But see what comes of it. The American, he comes to see me. He shows me the letter, leaves it here with me, but refuses—he refuses, I say—to let me interfere. That letter has tickled his fancy, just as it tickled yours. He is a very rich man, and a million francs, with the exchange, is not to him what a million francs should be. He does not give me the map, and that night, just before twelve, he rings me up. He tells me that all is well, and that his daughter is back!"

"What!"

"Yes, monsieur, that is what happens. Well, I am not sorry. The American out of the way is not too bad. I am now free to procure the release of the daughters of my compatriots, and the American girl herself may be able to give me valuable clues, not to mention the father who handed over the money."

Monsieur Dubonnet paused. Evidently he was coming to the part of his story which he found difficult to tell, the beginning of his failure.

"Yes," prompted Caryll gently, "and could they?"

"Monsieur," Dubonnet leant forward over his desk in his eagerness, "I took a statement from both, and in neither of these statements is there the slightest thing to help me. Consider! The girl had gone out shopping. She hailed a taxi to drive home. Something,

she said, happened in that taxi. In some devilish way she must have been overcome by chloroform. She knows no more until she wakes up in bed in a nicely-furnished bedroom. There are no windows to that bedroom, only two large glass skylights in the ceiling. She stays in that bedroom all the time until she is released. She sees no one, for her food—good food—is sent to her by means of a service lift. The door of her room is locked. She has quite a good rest cure, for she is provided with papers and books, and can read of her own disappearance. Then the time comes when she is to be released. What happens? This. She is informed, by note—which she left behind her, like a . . . a fool—that she must be ready to move at eleven at night. The time comes. Nothing happens. A quarter past eleven comes. Still nothing happens. Suddenly the door of her room is opened. Nobody comes in. It is a lift. She gets into it. The door shuts. She is in complete darkness. The lift descends—a long way, several flights, all in complete darkness. It suddenly stops. Something is thrown over her head. She cannot see a centimetre. She is directed into a car of some sort. The car moves off. Quite a short time after she hears the noise of Paris traffic. Very shortly after that the car stops. Someone gets inside and whisks off the covering on her head. There is a light shining into her eyes, and she can see nothing. When she gets accustomed to the light, she is surprised. The car is not moving, and there is no driver. She gets out, takes a taxi, goes home. We discover the car where it was left in a side street. It is traced; it

is a car that was stolen four days before. Of the driver, naturally, there is no sign at all."

Dubonnet paused again.

"C'est agaçant, ça!" he burst out.

"Rather!" said Caryll, "most *agaçant*. But what of the father?"

"That," continued Dubonnet, "is the queerest thing of all. He leaves Paris on foot, timing himself to arrive at the agreed spot at eleven. He is there at five minutes to eleven. He waits for a time, which he says must have been about ten minutes. The appointed meeting-place is at a cross-road well in the open. Suddenly a car drives up. It stops at the cross-road and a lady gets out. The lady comes straight up to him, and asks, in English, for the money. He hands it over. The lady returns to her car, and drives off rapidly towards Paris. No attempt to conceal anything! No precautions taken at all. What does it mean?"

"Well," said Caryll deliberately, "it must mean one thing, and that not too pleasant a thing. On the surface it would appear that these fellows must have a very intimate and up-to-date knowledge of the movements of your police, M. Dubonnet."

The little man sighed.

"That is a conclusion," he said, "which is becoming increasingly evident, monsieur. Now listen to this. I have in my possession information of the methods used. I know, *par exemple,* that the other two girls are probably concealed in the same house as the American girl was freed from, because from her description of the place it is plain that the house must have been

built specially for the purpose. You see what I mean: no windows, only skylights of clouded glass; no door, only *ascenseur;* no service, because all the food is brought up by a lift. A most peculiar room, but a room admirably suitable for the use which is made of it. That is a starting-point at least. And I know one other thing too. I know that it is a gang which is against me, and a gang which is both powerful and rich. How? Well, there were many in it: to run the house, to steal the car and, the worst of all, to find out about my movements and intentions. And if I am right about the house being specially built, then there must have been money to build it.

"I start by investigating the plans of every house built in the last three years anywhere near or in Paris. This takes me some time. I cannot find, however, any house which has a room in any way like the room in which the American lady was kept prisoner. I spend nearly a fortnight over that, and at the end I am at last assured that this method brings me no nearer. Monsieur, I have examined all the plans, seen a lot of the houses myself, and I find nothing at all like it."

"Perhaps a recent addition to an old house?" suggested Caryll.

"No, monsieur, I do not think so. I have investigated the business, and interviewed, by my men, every builder in or near Paris. None of them can remember building such a room. All of them say that if they had, they would remember it, as it sounds such a strange room. I get near despair, and then I get this."

Monsieur Dubonnet pulled out another sheet of

notepaper of the same pale green shade, and held it out to his guest.

"*Dear Mr. Dubonnet,*" read Caryll, "*it is now nearly a month since I took possession of three ladies, all of whom you know at least by name. The American parent of one of them has proved his intelligence and a sense of honesty, and has received his reward by regaining his daughter, although he is slightly the poorer. The other two male parents are proving themselves both difficult and stupid.*

"*I do not blame you for trying to interfere with my plans, because, since you are a policeman, you are only doing your duty. But I am pained at the conduct of the two fathers, who would, I should have thought, have realised by now that in all dealings with me it is infinitely better to accede at once to my wishes. Just to teach them a little lesson, I propose to stage a small demonstration of my power.*

"*Each of these two men will lose their wives, for a period of about twenty-four hours on some night of early November next. If this little demonstration should fail, then stern methods will be employed and some small interest charged by me for having had to wait so long for the money which is owing as the price of the return of the two charming young ladies at present staying with me.*

"*In conclusion, let me state that both these young ladies are at present in the best of health, and I believe quite happy. But I am becoming irritated.*

"*I have the honour to be*

"*One of your most obedient servants.*"

Caryll returned the letter and looked straight at Dubonnet.

"It is now the twentieth of November," he said, and waited.

The Frenchman folded up the letter before he replied. With great deliberation he placed it among the others in the open file before him.

"I am not inclined to leave things to chance," he said suddenly. "I confess I did not expect anything to happen; I thought this letter merely a boast—a practical joke, perhaps—from someone outside the case altogether. There are always a few fools of that description. As I shall tell you, however, I was quite wrong. But I acted—leaving, as I thought, nothing to chance. I put a plain-clothes guard on the two houses, and also put a man to shadow each of the ladies and generally look after them, just in case there should be anything in the letter. Last night, however, both disappeared."

"Great heavens!" said Caryll, half to himself. "What on earth are we up against?"

Dubonnet caught the gist of the half-spoken remark.

"That, monsieur, is what I ask myself. What on earth are we up against? A man of great power, certainly; a man who is cheeky, as you say; who is full of the dare-devil; and, if I am not mistaken, a man who is an Englishman."

"What?"

"Wait, please, a moment," Dubonnet continued, one hand extended with a gesture which commanded re-

spect for his wishes. "All these letters are in English, and in good English. That might not mean much, you will say. Perhaps not, and I am not relying on that. But the tone of the letters, the dare-devilness, the extraordinary nature of the whole amazing case! What do they point to?"

The little man paused, but only for a moment. Suddenly he leant forward, and his voice as he spoke was low and intense:

"Our criminals, monsieur, here in France, are cruel, quick, brilliant even, but not usually premeditated in their crimes. That is not in our blood, monsieur. I do not believe that a Frenchman would wait for a month for his ransom money. If it did not come in a week he would kill the girl and try someone else. This man, who waits so patiently, who is almost amusing in his letters, if the case were not so serious, who takes such risks, I think he is an Englishman. That is why I sent to you and asked you to come."

"On the principle of setting a thief to catch a thief! An Englishman to catch an Englishman!"

Dubonnet half rose in his chair in his perturbation.

"Monsieur Caryll, do not misunderstand me. I have never called you a . . ."

Caryll laughed.

"Dubonnet, old turnip," he interrupted, "that was only a figure of speech. I understand perfectly, and I think you are right. If this johnny is English—which from your reasoning is more than likely—I'll agree that I may possibly understand his character and actions better than you, and may therefore be of use."

"You can be, of that I am sure, if you will, Monsieur Caryll. I have not forgotten the part you played in that affair down at Biarritz. That is why I asked Scotland Yard on the telephone last night, immediately after these ladies disappeared, to try to persuade you to come and help me. I am grateful to you for coming, and coming so quickly. You will start, you see, with an advantage over any of my men. I am afraid that they are all known to this man. You are not. It is a great advantage."

To Caryll, the little man was almost comic in his anxiety to persuade him to help.

"These two ladies," he said suddenly, "how did they disappear?"

"That," said Dubonnet, "is a most annoying question for me to have to answer!"

He laughed. He was about to confess to a bad failure on the part of two of his men, a failure which reflected on him as head of the department to which they were attached, but yet he laughed. Caryll liked him for it; it was the right spirit, the point of view which denoted that greatest of all qualities, a sense of humour.

"They were both spirited away from under the very noses of my men. I cannot tell you exactly how it happened to the two ladies themselves. But both of my shadowers were suddenly accosted, both about the same time of the evening, although of course in entirely separate parts of Paris. They were dragged into a quarrel, and extraordinarily quickly a crowd gathered round. They got away as soon as they possibly

could, but . . . well, the old ladies had gone. That was last night. I expect them back to-night."

"Do you?"

"I do. The fellow who calls himself my most obedient servant has so far kept to his word. He did with the American. He said these two ladies would be back to-night, and I think they will be. That is why I wanted you to be here so soon, to be here so that you could hear at once their own story. Now, Monsieur Caryll, are you going to help me? Please do, in the name of France, monsieur."

The words were spoken so earnestly, with such obvious sincerity, that even had Caryll had any doubts on the point he might well have been influenced. But to Caryll, even one spark of excitement offered to him meant sheer, unadulterated joy. He had found the ordinary life of an independent gentleman in peace time so dull, so drab an existence after four hectic years of secret service in the Great War, that an opportunity such as this coming to him out of the blue was a surprise both delightful and exhilarating. One question only did he ask.

"Have I a free hand, M. Dubonnet?"

A great wave of relief spread itself almost visibly over the little Frenchman's face. He leant back in his chair, and Caryll noticed that little beads of perspiration, despite the November fog outside, were showing on his host's forehead. He had kept himself well in check during the interview, but now that he was so near the end, so near the successful conclusion, the strain was beginning to tell.

"You can do what you please," said Dubonnet. "All the resources of this office—within reason, all the resources of France—are at your disposal. If you accept, I shall hand over the case entirely to you."

Caryll took his case from his pocket, selected a cigarette, placed it in his mouth and lit it before replying. All the time Dubonnet watched his every movement, striving to read some sign which would tell him that he had enlisted the help of this man he was so anxious to count on his side.

"M. Dubonnet," suddenly said Caryll, "your offer is so tempting that I cannot refuse it. I gladly accept."

The effect of these words was dramatic. Dubonnet leapt to his feet, almost ran round his desk, and seized Caryll's right hand in both of his own.

"Bravo, cher camarade!" he cried. *"Et maintenant n'oubliez jamais que si vous avez besoin d'aide je suis toujours là."*

"Quite, old bean," said Caryll, laughing, "and thanks very much and all that. Only too delighted, I'm sure."

"When will you start?" asked Dubonnet, his excitement appeased.

"As a matter of fact, old dear," said Caryll, "I've already started. A pal of mine is at the moment interviewing a lady who I sincerely hope has no connection with this affair. However, one never knows. Some time ago a pair of scissors cut a piece of paper. But they didn't make a neat job of it. I've got a stone in my pocket, and I'd rather like to blunt those scissors!"

CHAPTER III

THAT Bill Wilson should be visiting Anne Sinclair at the request of Victor Caryll struck the former as a most extraordinary happening. As he walked down the Rue de la Paix—having seen Victor Caryll off to his appointment in a taxi from the restaurant where they had lunched—on the way to the address which Caryll had given him, he turned over in his mind certain events of two years' standing which he had, in point of fact, embarked on his world tour to forget, and which were now apparently to be thrust upon him once more, willy-nilly.

He could have refused his friend, of course. He could have stated firmly that his travelling was over, that he was now on his way home to rest a little and to renew all his ties and acquaintances. But somehow the idea of refusing anything which Caryll asked seemed absurd, seemed quite impossible. That Caryll had a great influence over him he made no effort to deny, even to himself. He well knew that others—most others, in fact—found themselves equally the slaves of this man, who, when once met, never failed to inspire both affection and confidence. Above anything, all those who were proud to boast of his friendship possessed a devotion which to Wilson at least was unparalleled in any others of the big men of his ac-

quaintance. Wilson had used the word slave to himself; he reiterated it now, pleased with it, but added to it the prefix "freed." There was nothing of the bully in Victor Caryll; he accepted the adoration of men as his natural birthright, but never capitalised the gift with any of his countless friends.

Wilson's thoughts, which had strayed to Victor Caryll as he approached the Place Vendôme, returned with redoubled force to his impending interview as he passed through that great square. He remembered how, two years before, he had been desperately in love with this woman he was about to visit, this woman who was the wife or widow of a man once almost his closest friend. He remembered a moment of madness, one moment during which his passion had got the better of his sense of loyalty, and during which his nearness to his hitherto secret love had driven him to steal one kiss from lips which should have been inviolable. He remembered the moment, directly afterwards, when a revolver shot had rent the night air, shattering alike his retrospective remorse and his happiness and peace for many days to come.

He had not seen the woman on whom he was about to call now for just those two years. Less than an hour before, Caryll had asked him a question—a direct question—which for one moment he had hesitated to answer, since it was just that query which he had flinched from asking of himself. Then, somehow, the proximity of the strength that was Caryll had imparted to him a like strength to reply. He had stated, quite emphatically, that he was no longer in love with

this woman who had so nearly stood in the dock, charged with complicity in a series of crimes as dastardly, as cruel, as any within the recollection of a lifetime. That, strange as it might seem, had been a great effort of will, for there is nothing that dies harder than the whole-hearted love and loyalty of a grown man for a woman.

He quickened his step. That this should be was not surprising, for his thoughts carried a doubt, infinitely small it is true, but sufficiently present to cast a very small shadow over the absolute truth of that reply to his friend. He quickened his step, therefore, to obtain by the added activity a touch of confidence, a touch of reliance on his own ability to carry out the task imposed upon him by Victor Caryll. He had to go and visit Anne Sinclair, to visit her as he might well do, passing through Paris and knowing that she lived there, to visit her as a friend without a hint of the presence of Caryll in the background, yet to ask two questions carefully formulated by Caryll. And to her answers he was to pay particular attention.

He turned over these questions in his mind. Now he was walking up the Champs Élysées, on the left-hand side between the avenue of trees, and reading the names of the streets so that he might not miss the turning in which her house or flat was situate. And all the time he kept on repeating to himself these questions, turning them over in his mind, altering the wording, until he was satisfied that no one—not even the dreaded criminal who might, and yet might not, be implicated in this affair of which he as yet knew noth-

ing, since Caryll had been reticent—could tell that behind his own apparent ingenuousness there lay the desire for information on the part of that criminal's most formidable enemy.

At length he found the street. He turned into it, and found the number he was seeking. The house was evidently an apartment house, and he asked the *concierge* for Mrs. Sinclair. He was directed to the second floor.

He reached a door. There appeared to be no bell, but a door-knocker in the likeness of a serpent was affixed. Wilson smiled; that little touch, unintentional but nevertheless pointed, served to renew his own self-confidence. He laughed at the thought that he might himself fall a victim to this serpent's artistry, that he might once more find himself being enslaved by this woman who in her turn certainly, two years before, had been kept well to heel by the man who was her husband, and who had known so well the wiles of the reptile now moulded in brass before him.

He lifted the head of the serpent, and let it fall heavily upon the woodwork. He waited a moment, and then heard steps approaching.

The door was opened.

Two years can play the devil with a woman. Bill Wilson knew that he was once more in the presence of her whom he had loved, of her whom he had known as Anne Sinclair, smartest of the smart set of her time, most modern in clothes and character of an age notable for abandon. But the woman who had opened the door, who now stood before him with

eyes opened wide by astonishment, presumably at his unexpected presence, was but a cruel caricature of that frail and glorious creature whom he had known and loved. The frailty was there still, but accentuated to a degree which made it unsightly, which gave her the appearance of skin hung haphazard on a skeleton. Her clothes were old, hung about her in misfit, had not even been mended where they had worn. A portion of underclothing, not too clean, was just apparent protruding above the dress in front in a manner which suggested that her dressing had been slipshod, and that her pride, so important to a woman, was now non-existent.

But although all this was noticed by the man, noticed and noted in that first glance, it was her face that really shocked him. Gone was the fire of vivacity from her eyes, gone was that glorious clear skin, the pride of her friends and the envy of her contemporaries. In their place, her eyes were watery and drab, devoid of life almost in their look of placid lack of interest, and her complexion, once carefully rounded off with the help of skilled fingers, now gave the impression of blotchy, unhealthy licence. All that was left to her were her features, and even these had suffered through the tautening and sinking of her skin and the swollen, brilliantly red, eyelids.

"Bill!"

"Anne!"

The two names were spoken almost simultaneously. The intonations of the voices were the same—of surprise; but for widely different reasons. The woman was

astonished at the presence, the identity, of her visitor. The man was horrified at this unexpected vision, almost of premature decay, which was now standing in front of him.

One hand went up to the woman's breast, the other remained on the door. It was an involuntary movement, a movement as if of excuse, acknowledging that she realised her appearance, the impression which she must give to her visitor.

Wilson understood it. For a moment only he hesitated, then the pity that was in him found expression. He took her hand in his and kissed it; even as he did so he noticed, involuntarily, the stains which he would have expected to see only on the hand of a rather careless, unwashed, boarding-house slut.

"Bill, I'm so glad, so very glad. Come in."

The voice was very low, husky, quite different from that clear, musical voice which had attracted him so greatly not so very long ago. He raised his head and smiled, and as he did so there came to him, if ever so slightly, just a whiff of stale whisky. The smell, coming with all the rest, revolted him, made him for one moment feel acute physical nausea.

Anne was now standing beside the door, holding it open. Wilson stepped in, mastering a sudden desire to turn tail and fly down the stairs behind him, far from this squalor which had accompanied the opening of the door. As he did so, the woman who was Anne led the way into a small hall, and Wilson followed, after shutting the outer door. There he removed his coat and hat, left them lying on an old settee, and fol-

lowed Anne into what was evidently her sitting-room.

Here, at least, some effort had been made to retain a certain trace of the past. The furniture was old, but clean. The room was tastefully, if cheaply, decorated. Two photographs adorned the mantelpiece, and Wilson started to recognise in one the likeness of Derek Sinclair as he had been, and in the other the cheerful features of Victor Caryll. Anne laughed. The sound, a mirthless one, almost grated in Wilson's ears. He turned round sharply.

"Why do I laugh?" She voiced his silent question, and then answered it. "You were looking at those photographs. You were surprised that I should have both Derek and Vic on the same mantelpiece, here in my room. I'll tell you, if you like. They were great friends. They liked each other for each other. Now they are great enemies. Some day I'll pitch that photograph of Victor Caryll out of this window, so that it crashes into the street below, to be swept up and taken off in the district refuse cart. For some day Derek, my Derek, will come back, and when he does he'll even out the score with Caryll."

A fierce light burnt momentarily in her eyes. But only for a second; the next instant that light had died, and there remained only that drab and toneless woman who was the new shadow of the old.

"Have you seen him lately?"

She asked the question in a torpid way; that one moment in which she had revealed her passionate hatred for the man who had unmasked her husband was now over, was gone.

But Wilson, for some reason which he would have been at a loss to explain, was on his guard. He answered without a moment's hesitation.

"I look forward to seeing him when I return to England."

There was a pause. Then, in a tired, listless way, the woman seated herself, and motioned to her guest also to do so.

"Bill, what have you been doing all this time?"

He told her. He jumped at the topic for a conversational interlude in which to collect his thoughts, make his plans as best he could. There were those two questions to ask, to ask in such a way that replies would be forthcoming and that suspicion would not be aroused. He must do this, and do it quickly, for if there was one thing uppermost in his mind just then, it was the desire to get away as soon as possible from this scene so different from what he had expected.

When he had finished:

"And all because of me?"

There was a trace, a faint trace, of the old gentleness of tone in the voice as it put the question. There was also a direct hint of the retention of the old understanding. The conditions were different; but Wilson as he answered could just see through the mist of squalor a little of the old Anne, and he answered truthfully:

"Had Derek been killed, then it might have been different. He was not killed, however, and whatever he had done, you had shown that you loved him. For my own sake I got out of the way."

"To return, cured, and find me . . . like this."

Cured! The very word that Victor Caryll had used nearly an hour before. Wilson laughed within himself, a bitter laugh which gave him no pleasure. Cured? Yes, he was cured now. Only an overwhelming pity remained, with just a suspicion of doubt now in himself, in all mankind. Was this the way of human love, that when the trappings were gone, when the cosmetics and silks had been replaced by stark poverty, love was changed to a sensation of pity which was in nature almost patronising?

He pulled himself together. Such thoughts were leading him astray, diverting him from the object of his visit. Cured! That word had been used by Victor Caryll, and Victor Caryll's two questions remained to be asked.

"Why . . . all this?"

He looked at Anne as he asked her, watched her face. She smiled, a hard smile.

"Because of Vic."

"Vic! But how?"

"He drove Derek into obscurity. It was impossible for me to join Derek, or for Derek to join me. He is wanted by the police all over Europe, if any knew he were alive. That much I thank Vic for, that he has not told. But for the good it's done us . . . Well, look at me now!"

"Have you seen him?"

"Once. A month after he got away, a week after I came out of hospital. I had just come here, to this flat, which I had bought with what remained to me from

the crash. He came at night, and he brought me a little money, what he could spare. He also brought me hope. Derek does not make idle boasts; he said he would come back, and come back he will. I am waiting."

"You haven't seen him since?"

"No, I am waiting."

The words were spoken with a certain dignity, lent to them by the faith which had inspired them.

Wilson was pleased with this, the answer to the first of Caryll's questions. He felt sure of the honesty of her words, which had rung true. More and more a sense of pity made itself felt within him, made him wonder how he could best help this woman in her dire need.

That, however, he could discuss with Caryll afterwards. Caryll too had known her, had been her friend in the days when she had been an ornament of society. She had no claim on him, for what he had done, his part in bringing ruin to her, had been his bounden duty to mankind. But Caryll had a tender heart, and Wilson knew that he would be ready to help this victim of a marriage to a man as crooked and unscrupulous as he was clever and, on occasion, attractive.

Wilson racked his brain for a natural way to approach his other question. He was reassured, now, that Derek Sinclair, the man they had known by the single word Brain on account of his devilish ingenuity, had no part in the case on which Caryll was in Paris. But that second question had to be asked, and the sooner he did it the better, for his desire to get away from the flat increased with the passing of every minute.

It was Anne herself, however, who gave him his opportunity.

"Bill," she said, "when Derek does return, you'll keep out of it, won't you?"

"Keep out of it?"

"Yes. The settlement between Derek and Vic Caryll. For when Derek comes back, when he sees me, there'll be a settlement, you know."

This, even on the surface, Wilson realised to be true. When and if Derek Sinclair did return, one glance at his wife would send him out a raging madman, filled only with a lust for revenge on the man who, however justifiably, however unwittingly, had brought this moral breakdown to the woman he loved.

"Derek should be fair. He should realise that it is his own mode of life which has brought him to his present pass, brought you to this."

For answer, Anne got up. She walked over to a mirror, looked at herself. Then, turning, she laughed again, a laugh devoid of all humour, all happiness.

"Should he?"

Wilson made no answer, but countered with another question, Victor Caryll's other question:

"Does he, does Derek, hate me?"

Just for one moment Wilson thought that Anne would not reply. Then, suddenly, she relaxed, walked back to her chair and once more sat down.

"Derek and I," she said, "talked over the whole affair that night that he came to me. No, Derek does not hate you. He knows, as I do, that you entered into that pursuit thinking only to avenge him, to avenge

me. With Caryll it was different. He knew—of that I am certain. Perhaps he did not know at once, but he could have, should have, handed over the reins to the police when he found out. Derek could have fought the police. It is Victor Caryll I—we—hate."

Wilson did not delay long after that. His two questions had been answered eminently satisfactorily, and he could return to Caryll and report that he did not doubt the sincerity of the answers. He made a few commonplace remarks, conscious of their triteness, unable to overcome the sense of awkwardness which had assailed him at the first sight of this strange Anne.

He made his departure as soon as he decently could. Outside, he hailed a taxi and directed it to the hotel at which Victor Caryll was staying. His visit he had loathed from the moment that the door had been opened, for he knew that it would be many days, even weeks, before he would be able to rid himself of the picture of that dirty, unhealthy caricature of the beautiful lady he had once loved.

On his way back he passed a florist. Yielding to an impulse he stopped the cab, got out, and directed that a large bouquet of roses be sent to the subject of his sombre thoughts.

But inside the flat which he had just left a man was standing, holding a towel in readiness to be used by this very lady, who was busily engaged in washing off all the artificial traces of her rapid fall from grace. Lying on the bed, ready to be donned, a creation from the Rue de la Paix itself waited to adorn the slender figure, now miraculously altered, of the woman who had looked like any slut.

CHAPTER IV

THE taxi deposited Wilson at the door of the hotel where Victor Caryll was staying, an hotel not so very far from the fashionable shops of the Rue de la Paix and the Avenue de l'Opéra, and therefore as central as any visitor could wish. Upon inquiry, Wilson was informed that Caryll had not yet returned, and he sat down to wait in a secluded corner behind a small palm tree, many of which served as decorations and looked well enough against the white marble of the lounge.

This he did not do on purpose. He had no reason to hide himself, no particular desire for seclusion. He picked up the Paris edition of a London daily, which was lying on a small table in front of him, and idly he began to turn over the pages to while away the time which he must wait. But although his one desire was to forget Anne, this his imagination would not allow him to do; for always there came to his mind a brain-picture of those swollen and scarlet eyelids, of that intensely pale face, identification marks now of Anne.

Metaphorically he shook himself. That this could do nothing but harm, this morbid recurrence in phantasy of what he had seen in the flesh—harm to his *morale,* he did not doubt. He reviewed, rapidly, the possibilities of his immediate future.

Caryll had given him a very rough outline of the job which was to engage him in Paris. It had of necessity been vague, this outline; for Caryll had not himself known very much. The idea of staying, to help Caryll should he be required, was one which appealed.

For two years now he had wandered on the face of the world, an idle fellow on the quest of forgetfulness. To go to the other extreme, to start again the excitement of the pursuit of crime, suddenly, like this, seemed a great chance.

Wilson made up his mind. When Caryll did come, he had promised to lay his cards on the table, to tell all he knew. Wilson would wait until he had heard the story. Then, if Caryll would have him, he would rejoin.

Wilson looked up idly. He had relaxed in the comfortable chair, thinking of nothing excepting his plans and waiting for the arrival of his friend. But that one glance had made him stiffen, made him suddenly sit bolt upright, every sense on the alert, every muscle ready for instant use in any emergency.

Unnoticed by him, so engrossed had he been in his thoughts, a man and a woman had entered the lounge and seated themselves at the table directly beside him, but sheltered from vision by the palm tree. He could not see their faces, nor could they see his. He was completely hidden, and he suddenly realised that the only thing which had given their presence away had been their voices. Provided, therefore that he remained silent, there seemed no likelihood of his own proximity being noted.

It was the one word "Caryll" which had so startled him, coming out of the blue, as it were, through the

leaves of the palm. Wilson would not ordinarily have listened; but he knew that his friend was on a case, and in such circumstances any methods, a fact which he had learnt from experience, might be used against him. It were sheer foolishness, therefore, not to take advantage of any kindly chance, provided advantage were to be obtained.

This he would find out quickly enough; so remaining perfectly still he listened.

"If Caryll is in Paris," said a man's voice, "he will be staying here."

"Why not ask at the office?" asked a woman.

"Too risky. They might tell him. If he is working, he will not have told any friend he may have in Paris that he has come. And if he is working, he is of interest to me."

Wilson smiled to himself. The voices were low, so low that he only of the others in the lounge could hear. He thanked Providence inwardly for the chance that had led him to this of all the other tables.

"What are we going to do?" asked the woman.

"Wait. I want to see for myself, but if he is long then I'll have to be content with a man watching the door. In the meantime, what about a cocktail?"

"That'll suit me. Have it dry, please."

"Waiter!"

The man's voice was raised. A boy approached and took the order.

Wilson racked his brains to remember if he had heard either of the voices before. But neither conveyed anything to him.

In this he was a little astonished. He had been sur-

prised at the knowledge of Caryll's habits which the conversation of this man and woman had pre-supposed. He could not quite rid himself of the pang of apprehension which had come to him on first hearing Caryll's name spoken—the fear that Derek Sinclair had come back. Derek Sinclair would know that Caryll, when in Paris, always stayed at this hotel; but the man's voice was not the one which he remembered only too well, and the woman's certainly was not Anne's. In any case, he had only just left Anne, a woman who could not possibly have passed unnoticed in this, the lounge of a well-known and respectable hotel.

The two on the other side of the palm had ceased to speak. But he had heard enough. It was evidently their desire to see Caryll, to prove his presence in Paris, without his knowledge. If he did not act, then Caryll would satisfy them himself within, perhaps, the next few minutes. Caryll must be warned.

Wilson half rose from his chair, then sat down again abruptly. A sense of powerlessness suddenly almost overwhelmed him. A new idea, a most disturbing idea, had come to his mind.

The couple on the other side of the palm had displayed a good knowledge of Caryll. Their conversation had proved to him that they knew him, at least by sight. Was it not perfectly possible, therefore that they also knew his friends? If Wilson showed himself, it was quite on the cards that the presence of Caryll would be assumed, and, far worse, that his own presence as an assistant would be realised, a position

which would halve his value to his friend. Yet if he did not show himself how could he warn Caryll?

He looked round carefully. There was no egress from the back. There were three exits only from the lounge, the first to the main entrance to the hotel, the second by the great staircase to the rooms upstairs, and the third to the restaurant at the back. To reach any of these he was bound to pass for a moment at least in full view of the couple whom he so particularly desired to avoid.

Yet Caryll must be warned; but with every moment's thought Wilson realised more and more the sheer impossibility of doing so unless he were to give away his own presence.

Another line of thought occupied him. Which was the lesser evil, that these two should see Caryll, or that his presence as an assistant should be recognised? He turned the question over in his mind. It seemed certain that sooner or later Caryll's presence on the case would be felt, if not seen; that it would be recognised by his opponents that he was working. On the other hand, there was nothing, as yet, to prove that he himself was so actively engaged in helping Caryll. The more he thought of it, the more he inclined towards remaining concealed, not warning his friend, but trusting to luck, and retaining his own position—a most useful one to Caryll: that of the unknown assistant.

He leant back in his chair and lit a cigarette. He had made up his mind.

The next hour was no more pleasant for this fact, however. He was on tenterhooks the whole time,

anxious lest Caryll should come, nervous as to what would happen if he didn't. The couple were strangely silent, or, if they did speak, it was in such a soft tone of voice that all he could hear was a low mumble. Wilson felt the strain acutely.

At last, however, the man said something that he could hear:

"Damn! I don't believe this fellow is ever coming. We'd better leave it to Pierre."

"Does he know him?" asked the woman.

"He's seen plenty of photographs, and he's got a remarkable memory. He'll recognise him all right. And, after all, he may not be staying here. But there's very little doubt that he is in Paris. They wired from London to say that he left by the night train last night. Come on, old lady. We'll go and get a little dinner."

The two got up. Wilson could hear this, and could see the folds of an evening cloak as the woman replaced it over her shoulders. They then walked over towards the entrance.

Wilson was suddenly the personification of activity. Just as the couple reached the door, he left the shelter of the palm. He saw that the man was tall, the girl slim and of average height. The cloak was of silk, in a royal blue, and finished with white fur. These details he noted mentally for possible future use.

But one thing struck him almost with a feeling of relief. The girl's hair was fair; Anne's which he had seen such a short time ago, was dark. Hair, however can easily be changed, even in a very short time, and it

was from her other extremity that Wilson gained most satisfaction. Her ankles were thick, and in no way resembled that slender pair which had been the pride of the girl Anne Sinclair, the Anne of two years ago, so different from the Anne whom he had seen that afternoon.

The couple passed through the revolving door of the main entrance to the hotel. Rapidly Wilson crossed the lounge and followed through the door. Here he paused, for the two had evidently hailed a taxi, and were standing on the kerb.

Carelessly the man withdrew a cigarette case from his pocket, selected a cigarette, and put away the case. He placed the cigarette between his lips, lit it with a match, and threw the spent match-stick on to the pavement. Something in this action attracted the attention of the watching Wilson.

The gesture had looked awkward. For a moment Wilson did not understand why. His attention was occupied in watching the man hand his companion into the taxi which had drawn up by the pavement. As the man entered in his turn Wilson caught a glimpse of the face. There was nothing in the least familiar in it, except the familiarity of the type. The man looked a typical Frenchman; yet he had spoken in English to his companion in the hotel, and an idiomatic English, without a trace of any foreign accent.

Suddenly Wilson realised why the man's action when throwing away the spent match had looked peculiar and arrested his attention. He had thrown the match backwards and to his right; not into the gutter nor

dropped it at his feet as a normal person would have done. Then, in a flash, the full significance of all this struck the man who had been watching.

Wilson smiled to himself. In the hotel, the man, when tired of waiting, had said that he proposed to leave the question of identifying Victor Caryll to a subordinate outside, a man he referred to as Pierre. Yet he had made no effort to get in touch with this man, but had merely passed normally out of the hotel into a taxi and driven off. Could this match-stick hold a signal?

Wilson himself advanced on to the pavement. There was no risk in this; the man Pierre, even if watching, would scarcely know him by sight. He looked to his right; the lights of a jeweller's shop lit up the surrounding pavement.

Two men were looking in at this shop window. One was old, shabby, looking at the beautiful gems probably with envy. The other was young, well if soberly dressed, a man difficult to recognise if in a crowd, since there was nothing distinctive about him.

Wilson was just in time to see a significant happening. This young man looked down for a moment on the pavement just as Wilson caught sight of him, looked up again almost at once, and allowed himself the faint luxury of a smile. Then he moved off, very slowly, his time evidently on his hands. He did not move far from the hotel door.

But Wilson's gaze had followed that glance on to the pavement, and had seen lying there the spent match-stick. This, in itself, might not have been sur-

prising, but this match-stick was different from most. It was bright green in colour.

Satisfied that he had chanced on the means of communication, Wilson retired within the revolving doors of the hotel. He knew that he must think, and think quickly. Caryll was already much overdue, and might reasonably be expected to appear at any moment. To dispose of this outside watcher should not be impossible, and was certainly to be desired, for although Caryll would not be able to keep his presence a secret for long, at least a delay would give him a start, and might make it inconvenient for these people, who evidently required knowledge of his movements.

Suddenly Wilson was struck by an idea. Its very audacity appealed to him, made him think that he might be able to carry it out. He pulled out his watch from its home in his waistcoat, and undid the chain. It was very thin and light, made of gold and of the type usually described as a dress watch. Wilson concealed this in his hand.

Once more he passed through the swinging doors, and out on to the pavement. A quick glance round, and he caught sight of the watcher, now stationary in front of another shop a little farther down the street. Wilson moved towards him.

As he approached, he noted with relief that the man was wearing a loose overcoat, and that the pockets of this were not protected by flaps. He passed the man, stopped, came up to the shop and stood beside him, close to him, on his left side. Only for a moment, however; then he moved off quickly to find a policeman.

As luck would have it, Wilson almost ran into one at the next corner. Briefly he stated his case. He had been standing looking into a shop window, or so he said. A man had been beside him. He had looked at his watch, realised that it was time for him to return home, replaced his watch, cast one last glance at the objects in the window, and then moved off. For some reason he could not explain, he had looked round and seen the man slip something in a surreptitious manner into his overcoat pocket. He had felt in his own watch pocket; the watch was no longer there. He described the watch minutely.

The policeman was, fortunately, a man of action. He accompanied Wilson at once to the scene of the alleged theft. The unsuspecting watcher had moved, but had not gone far, and Wilson pointed him out.

The first thing that the representative of the law did was to hail a taxi. When this had drawn up to the kerb, he accosted the man, dragged him in spite of his wild expostulations into the cab, and signalled to Wilson to follow him. The driver, instructed beforehand to drive to the district police station, obeyed his instructions.

In the cab the completely bewildered watcher was informed of his crime, and immediately started to protest vehemently. But all to no purpose, for the law put its hand into his pocket and withdrew the watch. Wilson laughed to himself at the sight of the unfortunate Pierre's face; first he registered complete astonishment, but then he became sullen. Possibly, thought

Wilson, he was beginning to suspect the trick that had been played on him.

At the station the unfortunate man was immediately removed to the cells. Wilson had a short interview with the Commissaire, and explained the true situation as best he could, requesting that the Sûreté should be communicated with. This the Commissaire promised to do, but he pointed out that in any case he would have to make a preliminary examination of the case on the following morning for the *juge d'instruction's* examination later in open court.

"We can hold the man over for a day or two, in any case, if necessary, monsieur. If I am backed up by the Sûreté—which no doubt I shall be—then I can do that on my own responsibility. In the meantime, will you kindly give me your name and address, so that I can communicate with you when I shall require you?"

This Wilson did, and having dallied for a few moments with the Commissaire in a neighboring café, he took a taxi back to the hotel.

He was well pleased with himself. He had achieved with little trouble what he had not thought to accomplish so easily. Now, not only had he got rid of the watcher, but he had contrived to place himself in a position where he could at any time be seen by Caryll, and perhaps become a mine of information about those who employed him. The more did Wilson think of it, the more pleased did he become.

He smiled happily at his thoughts. This day had been one of excitement, of employment. For the first time in two years he had something to do, something

definite to occupy him and to make him use his brain. He found that he had enjoyed it; that, perhaps for the first time in those two years he was satisfied. He thanked his Maker fervently that he had been vouchsafed that chance meeting with his old friend Victor Caryll, that once more he was on the exhilarating high-road of activity, both physical and mental.

The taxi drew up at the hotel. He paid it off and entered the lounge once again. He looked around for Caryll, and almost immediately he saw him.

Seated at a table in the far corner of the room, Caryll was engaged in the congenial pastime of lowering a large tankard of French ale.

CHAPTER V

CARYLL waved cheerily as he saw his friend approaching. He then emitted the one word:

"Waiter!"

Wilson, rather amused, sat down at the table at the same moment as a waiter approached.

"Old bird," said Caryll in that curiously high voice which was characteristic of him, and was always a constant source of astonishment to those who heard him speak for the first time, an amazingly high-pitched voice for a man of such preposterous proportions, "it is my privilege and pleasure to order a drink for you. What shall it be?"

"Thank you," remarked Wilson feelingly, "I need one. A dry Martini, if you please."

"Two dry Martinis, waiter. *Triple sec.*"

The waiter withdrew to fetch the drinks, and Caryll looked across at his friend.

"Sorry I'm late, old bean. I've joined in with the Sûreté, and things have started briskly."

Wilson laughed outright.

"They have!"

"To you as well?"

"Well, I got in the way on your behalf. I suppose you know they suspect you're on the job, whoever 'they' may be?"

Caryll regarded his friend closely, the faint shadow of a frown on his forehead.

"The dickens they do! No, I did not know that, old fellow. How did you come across this knowledge?"

Briefly Wilson told him the whole story, from the moment when he had unexpectedly heard the name "Caryll" through the palm tree to the moment when he had taken leave of the French policeman outside the café. Caryll listened without making any interruption until the end.

Then he burst out laughing. The idea of the watcher being whisked off to a prison cell so unexpectedly and so neatly struck him as being full of humour.

Wilson, not displeased, waited until the spasm should be over.

"Perfect!" gurgled Caryll, recovering himself slightly. "Poor boob! What a shock he must have got! Bill, old buster, that was a darned good idea of yours. I'll have to get into touch with my good friend M. Dubonnet. This laddie may prove to be the first link which is to lead us to success."

"One moment," Wilson interrupted his friend, a trifle seriously. "You said: 'which is to lead *us* to success.' Can I take that *'us'* to include me?"

Caryll hesitated for half a second.

"Bill, old cherub," he said suddenly, "there is nothing which I should prefer. But—well, you'd better hear the whole story first. I shouldn't like to think that you had put your head into a noose, if this is to be a noose—it's something big, anyway—without having a pretty shrewd knowledge of what may be coming to you, to us all."

He stopped for a moment while the waiter, who had

just returned, placed two cocktails on the table. As soon as the man was once more out of earshot, he resumed:

"Here's to you, Bill. Now listen."

Concisely, but very clearly, Caryll told Wilson all that had passed between himself and Dubonnet during their interview at the Paris Sûreté. He exaggerated nothing, but, on the other hand, he minimised nothing. He told the whole amazing story of the disappearance of the three girls just as Dubonnet had told it, without heat and therefore fairly.

When he had finished there was a long pause. The two friends regarded each other squarely, without flinching. Finally Caryll drained his glass and placed it empty on the table with a sudden gesture.

"So, Bill, old fellow," he said quietly, "it's up to you now to make your decision. You know the state of affairs. We are up against a gang, powerful, rich and daring. Somebody's going to get hurt, and although of course I shall do my best that it shouldn't be on our side, well—accidents do happen. And there's always the chance that it may be Derek Sinclair whom we're up against; in which case I think it is fairly safe to assume that the fur will fly. There's the personal touch there, you see."

"No," said Wilson shortly. "I don't think it's Derek we're up against."

"Just half a second. *'We're'* up against?"

"Of course."

"Good fellow! Well, why not?"

"Because of Anne."

"Well?"

In his turn, Wilson gave a graphic description of his interview with Anne. His account, perhaps, was not quite so fair as Caryll's had been, for in his case the personal element could not be entirely suppressed. This woman whom he was describing in her present pitiful state had been the lovely butterfly of society whom he had loved. Wilson did his best not to be too much influenced by sentiment, but he found the matter one which had excited his compassion. An ex-lover is seldom a fair man in respect to his extinguished flame.

Caryll heard him to the end. For a few minutes after he said nothing, turning the matter over in his mind. If he came to any conclusion he did not impart it to his friend, but instead took out a cigarette and lit it. Then, inhaling the tobacco with evident satisfaction, he remarked:

"Dubonnet will be interested in your capture. The captive should be able to give us a little information, if it is made clear to him that by so doing he will help himself considerably. I'll just go and telephone to the little buffer."

"Half a tick!" Wilson put out a restraining hand. "While you're away I'll order a couple to seal our renewed partnership. What'll it be?"

"What! Another?" Caryll shook his head. "No, old man, I'm through."

He moved one pace away, and then turned:

"Unless it's a dry Martini!"

Laughing, Wilson gave the order.

Caryll's return from the telephone coincided with the arrival of the cocktails.

"Well," he said, raising his glass, "here's to us, old top."

He drained the glass.

"They are small, aren't they? Wouldn't intoxicate a flea. You're wanted at the police station to-morrow."

"Are they going to prosecute on the watch, then?" asked Wilson in surprise.

"They are and they aren't. It entirely depends on how your captive behaves himself to-morrow morning when he is examined by the Commissaire. It is for that you are required."

Wilson looked puzzled.

"I don't understand. D'you mean he's being tried to-morrow?"

"No. The Law works a bit differently here in Paris to our own in London. A man when first arrested is immediately brought before the *Commissaire de Police*. He's a sort of station magistrate, but without powers to deal with anything really serious. He investigates, and if he thinks there is a case, then he puts it back for the *juge d'instruction,* who is the real magistrate. He's the johnny who can and does pass sentence. Got that clear?"

"Yes, I see."

"And it's the Commissaire's preliminary investigation that you must attend to-morrow."

He paused for a moment.

"You may see some things, Bill, old broncho, which you won't think—fair. I don't suggest that they practise the third degree, but—well, they do things differently in France to England. And they're going to try

to get information out of this wretched man to-morrow. I shall be there too, so you mustn't interfere unless I do. Get me?"

Caryll had spoken very seriously. To Wilson, watching him closely, there had appeared to be just a suggestion of apprehension in his voice. Evidently here was a duty that did not attract, this presence at the police station on the following morning.

"I understand."

For a moment the two friends were silent, busy with their thoughts. Then, abruptly, Wilson changed the conversation:

"Why were you so late this evening? It was providential, but you haven't explained your most unusual unpunctuality, Vic?"

"Well," said Caryll, once more with his usual twinkle in the eyes, "it was because of those two old ladies whom our mysterious enemy purloined to prove his power. Just as I was leaving the Sûreté after my interview with Dubonnet, news came through that they had returned. Dubonnet and I rushed off and did two rapid interviews."

He paused for a moment.

"I say, Bill, old toad," he suddenly went on, "this johnny is pretty powerful, you know. He's a bit of a humorist, too! And he seems to own most of the taxis in Paris. Can you guess what he did?"

"Get on with it!"

"About five pip emma yesterday both the old ladies took taxis. They were promptly overpowered by some

curious gas, which doesn't seem to have any displeasing after-effects at all. The next thing they knew was that they were in a train. It was perfectly dark, they were very drowsy, and as one of them said: 'It wasn't worth while to do anything but sleep.' That seems to be the only after-effect of the stuff. So they did sleep."

He laughed.

"When they woke up, they found that they had been travelling in a P.L.M. express to precisely eight hours' journey from Paris. Each found in her bag no money, but a return ticket. At the first stop they created a disturbance. Nobody would believe them. They were nearly locked up as loonies. So they used the return half of their tickets, and there you are! No clue, nothing!"

"Moral, don't use taxis!" suggested Wilson, smiling.

At once Caryll became serious.

"You've said it, Bill. For heaven's sake be careful. I admire the ingenuity of this lad we're up against, but by heaven I shouldn't care to fall into his hands! Dubonnet has placed a car at my disposal, and in that car I propose to ride always. Either that car or my two flat feet!"

Once more Caryll smiled.

"Dubonnet," he said, "asked me to congratulate you on your capture. Also to welcome you to the fold. What about a spot of food?"

"An idea," said Wilson, "which fills me with delight."

It is doubtful, however, whether the two friends would have been quite so pleased, or have retained such admirable appetites, had they been privileged to attend a conference in a flat not very far from that great thoroughfare, the Champs Élysées, which Wilson had visited earlier in the day.

Three men and a woman sat round a table. The woman was in evening dress, as were two of the men, but both wore green silk hoods over their heads. The third, an undersized, nondescript little man, was making a report.

"I watched Pierre," he was saying in French, "waiting for the signal which I knew would mean that I could dismiss for the night. I began to get impatient; Pierre didn't give it. So I just waited, watching him. Suddenly a policeman came up, with a gentleman I recognised as the man I'd followed from here this afternoon to a florist. The gentleman and the policeman arrested Pierre, and took him off to the station of the *arrondissement*. I don't know what he was charged with. I managed to find out afterwards that he will come before the Judge to-morrow morning."

"Thank you," said one of the men. "That will do."

The little fellow retired from the room. The two men removed their hoods and looked at one another. One was revealed to be a tall, elegant, typical Frenchman. All were very serious.

"This bears out that you were right," suddenly remarked the other man, this time in English. "Always set a watcher to watch a watcher. I'm sorry I dis-

agreed. It certainly seemed to me a waste of man-power."

The dark man smiled. There was no mirth in this smile, however.

There was a long pause.

Evidently here was the leader. Both the other man and the woman waited quietly for him to speak. But there was tension in the air. Here was something of importance to be decided, a crisis.

Suddenly the tall, dark, elegant, typical Frenchman spoke.

"I hate to lose Pierre, but it matters little. He knows nothing, and must be replaced. Kindly make the necessary arrangements, John. I shall take pleasure in making Caryll and Wilson pay for this."

The woman paled slightly. Even in such society a death sentence does impress.

CHAPTER VI

IN a private room at the police station Dubonnet met the two friends on the following morning. They were a few minutes early, a few minutes before the time arranged for the Commissaire to hold his investigation.

Caryll introduced Bill Wilson to the chief of the Sûreté.

"I congratulate you, monsieur," said Dubonnet warmly. "That was a splendid idea of yours. Perhaps —who knows?—you may have started us on the right track at last. I think there can be little doubt that this man is employed by the man we want. Perhaps we can make him tell us something of interest."

"Make him?"

It was Caryll who reiterated the words. Dubonnet laughed.

"We have different methods here in France to yours in England, *camarade*. We do not see why, for the good of society as a whole, we should not be a little rough with a certain type of mind. Surely you realise that, if something can be gained by force, and that something can be used for the benefit of mankind as a whole, force is justifiable. And as well, what of the character of the criminal? There are some minds

which can only be influenced by physical pain, which have no better feelings at all. It is to these that we apply—less gentle treatment."

Wilson looked at Caryll quickly.

Victor Caryll was staring with unseeing eyes at the floor in front of him. In a sense it was an able justification to which he had just listened. But, from his straightforward point of view, it failed on two counts. The first that it seemed too nearly contradictory to the old saying that two blacks do not make a white, and the second that, after all, any system which is so liable to misapplication cannot be sound.

It was only the latter that he voiced, however.

"I'm sorry, Dubonnet, old cherub. But the idea seems too liable to abuse for my liking. However—well, we're in France!"

"And therefore we'll do as the French do!" laughed the little Frenchman.

"Only because we've got to," said Caryll shortly.

By mutual if silent consent, the matter was not referred to again; but what might have turned into an awkward pause was saved by the sudden arrival of the Commissaire.

"Good-morning, gentlemen. Shall we proceed?"

Dubonnet nodded curtly.

The four moved into the adjoining room. This was furnished as a sort of miniature courtroom. At one end there was a long desk, on each side of which chairs had been placed. A sort of railing separated this desk from the rest of the room.

The Commissaire took his seat at the desk. Dubon-

net sat on one of the chairs to the right, while Caryll and Wilson occupied others on the left. A moment later and the man Pierre was brought in between two policemen. A police sergeant was also present.

Caryll's and Wilson's French was sufficient to enable them to follow the conversation.

"Now then," said the Commissaire harshly, "what's your name?"

The answer came back at once.

"Pierre, monsieur. But I did not—"

"Stop! You will not talk except to answer my questions, understand? And what is the use of Pierre to me? Your surname, quick."

"Meunier."

The Commissaire wrote this down on a form in front of him.

"Now——"

"Monsieur, I swear I did not—ah!"

One of the two policemen had jabbed the man, eager to establish his denial, viciously in the ribs.

"You will not speak unless you are spoken to," said the Commissaire, frowning angrily. "And don't bother to deny that you took the watch. I don't care a damn about that."

Pierre Meunier looked at the Commissaire in evident surprise. Then, for the first time, he looked at the occupants of the chairs on each side of the desk.

The Commissaire watched him intently. The man looked first at Dubonnet, but he made no sign. He looked then at Wilson, but again made no sign. Then his eyes met those of Victor Caryll.

He started. The faintest tinge of colour came to his pallid cheeks.

The Commissaire smiled, and rubbed his hands.

"I do not care—a—damn—about—the—watch," he repeated, never taking his eyes from those of the man in front of him.

Pierre Meunier's face assumed a sullen look. Evidently he now realised the whole truth, the reason for his arrest, the fact that the watch had been planted on him. A muttered curse escaped his mouth.

"Now listen, Meunier." The Commissaire's voice was cold and compelling. "You were spying on this gentleman, Monsieur Caryll, last evening outside his hotel. You were doing so on behalf of a gang, led by a mysterious personage who writes insulting letters and signs them by the nom-de-plume of Obedient Servant. Weren't you?"

There came no answer.

"Wake him up," snapped the Commissaire.

Instantly one of the two policemen standing on each side of Pierre Meunier turned, and before the luckless man could guess his intention, swung a vicious right-hand punch at his jaw. Pierre Meunier went down with a crash.

But he had spirit. He scrambled to his knees, and thence to his feet, only to meet another brutal blow on the mouth when still off his balance. He went down again abruptly, and lay moaning on the ground.

"Get up."

The Commissaire's voice was merciless. By not so much as the smallest inflection did he give a hint that the scene sickened him.

Pierre Meunier did not rise. Undoubtedly he must have heard, but probably he did not understand, being in only a semi-conscious condition, induced by the two blows he had received.

One of the policemen took a step forward, and kicked his prone body savagely.

On the instant Victor Caryll was on his feet. But as he rose from his chair he felt a restraining hand on his arm. He looked round.

It was the Commissaire who had stopped him. There was a smile on the man's face, a smile half apologetic.

"You will excuse me, monsieur," he whispered, "but this is my business."

It was a rebuke, but a just one. Caryll understood this on the instant. He was witnessing a scene which would not have been tolerated in England, but which was an everyday happening here in France. It might all appear beyond justification in his English eyes, but he was on foreign soil. In any case, it was not brutality out of cruelty; it was deliberate brutality with a very definite purpose, the object for the good of society as a whole; and since it was the unofficial custom of the country whose guest he was, he understood that it was gross impertinence and lack of manners on his part thus to show his disapproval.

He sat down again, although reluctantly.

That kick had stirred Pierre Meunier back to his senses. He struggled to his feet, and Caryll noticed that the policeman who had kicked him helped him up not too unkindly.

He stood before the Commissaire, swaying slightly, his mouth bleeding where one of the blows had cut the lip.

"Have you any sense now, Meunier, or do you require more help in order to answer me?"

The Commissaire's voice had lost not one jot of its harshness.

"I will answer."

The voice was broken.

Wilson, sitting beside Caryll found his thoughts in a chaotic state. The sight that he had just witnessed sickened him, gave him a sensation of acute physical nausea. He looked again at the bleeding face of the unfortunate prisoner, and, glancing at the eyes, noticed that they had lost their lustre and had taken on a sort of cowed expression. Wilson, soft-hearted to a fault, could not rid himself of the thought that it was entirely through him that Pierre Meunier was being subjected to such bullying treatment. He realised abruptly that, had he known the consequences of his action, he would have hesitated to cause the arrest of the man, and would willingly have thrown away all the advantage which this questioning might yield.

"That is sensible." The Commissaire's voice broke in upon his thoughts. "Now, you were spying on Monsieur Caryll for this kidnapper. Weren't you?"

"Yes."

"What did he want to know?"

"If the gentleman was in Paris."

"Why?"

"I think because he thought the gentleman would be working for the Sûreté against him."

There was a pause.

"Who is he, this kidnapper?"

"I do not know."

"What does he look like?"

"Tall. Beyond that, I do not know."

Slowly the Commissaire rose to his feet. Deliberately he walked round the desk and towards Pierre Meunier, keeping his eyes held by his own all the time. There was something menacing in his movement.

Suddenly Meunier's nerve broke.

"No! no!" he screamed. "Monsieur, I swear I am telling the truth! None of us has seen his face. He always wears a green silk hood over his head. I'd tell you if I knew, but I don't, I don't!"

For a moment the Commissaire remained where he was, his chin stuck out, his face forward and near that of the terrified Pierre. Then, abruptly, he returned to the chair behind the desk.

"Where does he live?"

"I do not know, monsieur; I swear I do not know. We never see him, or each other. When he wants any of us, we get a note telling us of a meeting-place. It is on the boulevards sometimes, at this or that café on other occasions."

"You are lying to me!"

The voice was a voice of thunder. The Commissaire had risen to his feet, a towering picture of wrath. He ran round the desk, vaulted the railing suprisingly lightly for a man of his size. He stood directly in front of the cowering prisoner.

"You are lying to me, do you hear? How can you never have seen him—this man who always conceals himself under a green hood—if you have met him on the boulevards? How can he wear a hood, a green silk hood, on the boulevards without being noticed, you fool?"

The Commissaire lifted his fist as if to strike.

The effect was instantaneous.

"Wait!" screamed Meunier. "It is not he I meet. It is the go-between. He it was who told me about the green silk hood. I have never seen the Chief!"

The Commissaire did not lower his fist.

"'Who was the go-between?"

"I do not know, monsieur. I swear I do not know. I should recognise him if I saw him, that is all."

"That will do, Monsieur le Commissaire."

It was Dubonnet's precise voice which interrupted. Abruptly the Commissaire turned on his heel and returned to his desk.

Dubonnet stood up. Evidently he had made up his mind. When he spoke it was decisively, with no hesitation.

"If I let you go, Meunier, will you find out who this go-between is, and the next time you have an appointment with him, will you let me know?"

"Oh, yes, yes, monsieur."

"Are you sure that I can trust you?"

"Yes, I swear it, monsieur. On my word of honour!"

Dubonnet laughed dryly.

"Your word of honour does not interest me, Meunier. But what I am going to say, I think, will

interest you. At the first sign of treachery to me you qualify for an extremely unpleasant year or so. See?"

"You need not worry."

"I do not worry."

Dubonnet turned to the police sergeant.

"Release him. Give him some food, and then turn him loose."

Protesting his thanks, Pierre Meunier was led out.

Dubonnet turned to Caryll with a smile.

"Disappointing, was it not? I shall have him watched, of course. But I do not expect great things. Anyway, he is a great deal more useful to us free but under observation than locked in a cell."

Caryll smiled.

"There's just one thing I'd like to ask," he said. "With what did you threaten him? He can't come to much harm, at least as yet. They haven't killed anyone, have they?"

Dubonnet, lighting a cigar, did not answer at once. Then:

"Some people will believe anything,'" he said. "Meunier is now physically afraid. That fear is the best way to ensure that man's allegiance."

CHAPTER VII

CARYLL and Wilson decided to return to the hotel, to which Wilson had moved on the previous evening, in order to be more handy if required in an emergency. They walked the distance, there being no longer any point in attempting to give the impression that they were not working together on the affair, now that the man Meunier had been released. He was bound to give some information of an accurate description to the go-between in order to re-establish confidence, and it was felt that this knowledge would do little or no harm.

They walked in silence for some way, both deep in thought, turning over the recent incidents in their minds.

It appeared to Caryll that the obvious efficiency of this gang almost bore the trade-mark of the man Derek Sinclair, his erstwhile friend, whom he had helped to run to earth and prove responsible for many heartless and dastardly crimes. His thoughts ran to the last occasion on which he had heard from the man, indirectly though it had been. He had left him, as he thought, a man bound to be dead, dashed to pieces by the rocks of Biarritz and a heavy sea. But, just after, he had received almost definite proof that in this belief he had been fooled. And he remembered, with just

a touch of anger, a remark which this later knowledge had caused him to make.

"Bill," he said suddenly, "d'you remember a little dinner—a celebration dinner—which you and I had together just on two years ago?"

Wilson laughed.

"Indeed I do."

"We learnt that Sinclair had fooled us."

Wilson noticed the use of the name Sinclair instead of the more familiar Derek, but made no comment.

"We did."

"Well, as far as I remember, I made a definite statement on that occasion. I said something like this, if I remember rightly: 'Next time, if there is one, there'll be no quarter given or received. No more of these no-decision bouts for me.' Did I say that, or did I not?"

"Something like it, anyway."

"Well, old bean, bird or boomerang, am I up against the 'next time' now?"

Wilson looked at his friend in surprise. His mind carried him back momentarily to his interview with Anne Sinclair on the previous day, to his horror at the change in her. That there would be a reckoning between Caryll and Sinclair seemed inevitable, but that Caryll should think that fight to a finish already started appeared to him as a trifle premature.

He said as much:

"I don't see why you should assume that. The facts as I understood them from Anne yesterday pointed to Sinclair being still abroad."

Unconsciously, he also had avoided the use of the Christian name Derek. He noticed it as he had pronounced the name, and inwardly he smiled. There was no doubt now in his own mind that the friendship which he had cherished for Derek Sinclair was as dead as mutton, killed by the man's own deeds. As for Caryll, Bill guessed well enough that he felt the same.

"You may be right," said Caryll slowly, "and I may be quite wrong. But I've got a hunch about it. Listen to this, anyway. We're up against an organisation—and a darned well-trained one. Just the sort of thing that Sinclair would have loved to bring into being and control. This organisation has specialised in a form of unlawful abduction which is clearly original, and the man at the head has written some interesting and, candidly, amusing letters. Again the sort of thing which Sinclair, a man who has had the advantages of an excellent education, would revel in."

He paused. His words had given Wilson food for thought. There was a great deal of truth in all that he had said—so much that only the evidence of his own eyes and ears could have refuted it. But Wilson had had just that evidence on his visit to Anne, the wife of the man under discussion.

"Vic, you're on the wrong lines. Are you sure that Derek Sinclair hasn't become an obsession to you?"

"Quite possibly, quite possibly, old fellow."

The words, the earnestness of tone in which they were spoken, had their effect on Wilson. There remained, however, that visit of his to Anne to cast a disapproving eye on all this theory.

"Well, Vic," he said suddenly, "I'll ask you a question now. What of my visit to Anne yesterday?"

His friend remained silent for a moment. The two friends had now reached the Tuileries, and to proceed to the hotel they would have to take a turning down to the right. Caryll stopped on the pavement, deep in thought.

"Yes," he said suddenly, "what of your visit, old chump? I think I'd better go and see. Eleven in the morning is not a normal time to call, whereas the afternoon, which you employed, is much more usual. I'll meet you at the hotel for lunch."

He walked off rapidly, towards the Champs Élysées.

Wilson watched him go. The significance of Caryll's words were not lost on him. He smiled to himself as he followed the broad figure with his eyes, followed it until it was lost to sight in the throng of pedestrians along the pavement. Then, idly, he turned down the street in which the hotel was situated.

He had not unpacked his things, and it seemed to him now that he would be in Paris for some days at least. It occurred to him that here was an excellent opportunity, for he had now what he might not have again, time on his hands.

He entered the hotel and made his way to the staircase. To do this he had to pass the hotel office and he was surprised to hear his name called out as he passed.

He stopped. A clerk was leaning over the ledge of the office. He retraced his steps.

"Excuse me, sair. There is a lady waiting to see Monsieur Caryll. Perhaps you would like to see her?"

Wilson hesitated; then he made up his mind. No harm, at any rate, could come of this.

"Very well. Where is she?"

"Follow me, sair."

The clerk led the way to a secluded corner of the lounge. He stopped before a chair in which a girl was seated.

"Mademoiselle," he said, "here is Monsieur Wilson, the friend of Monsieur Caryll."

He bowed, and withdrew.

Wilson found himself looking down into one of the most attractive faces he had ever seen. The girl was not beautiful, but she was essentially pretty and attractive. Her features, not quite so regular as to become monotonous, were of themselves just right. Her eyes were dark, and very slightly oval. Her nose was small, but not too small, and carried the very faintest suggestion of a tilt at its end, which somehow seemed to impart to her whole expression a slight suggestion of audacity. Her mouth, smallish and very red, succeeded in confirming this impression.

The girl smiled.

Wilson was fascinated by that smile. Her slightly parted lips gave a glimpse of teeth both regular and beautifully white.

"So glad, Mr. Wilson. And I'm sorry to have put you to trouble. But I'm waiting to see Mr. Caryll."

She neither rose nor offered him her hand. Wilson understood perfectly; here was a snub which on the surface was both justified and deserved. The girl no doubt imagined that he had attempted to scrape an

acquaintance, and having learnt that she was waiting for his friend, had utilised this knowledge to his own ends. She was determined, evidently, to show him quite gently but very firmly that she had no particular desire for his company.

But Wilson also knew that it was unlikely that any of Caryll's personal friends would know of his presence here in Paris, and that if this girl were not a friend of this nature, then she was most certainly present in the hotel purely on business. And one other thing had excited his interest; the girl, when she had spoken, had betrayed her nationality. A most attractive, if faint, American twang had been distinctly noticeable.

Wilson's thoughts flew back to the story which Caryll had told him—the story of the three kidnapped girls which was exercising to such an extent the best brains of the Paris Sûreté. As he did so, he remembered that of these three, one had been ransomed, and that one a young and beautiful American.

He looked at her again, and racked his brains to discover some method whereby, while giving nothing away, he might convince her that in the absence of Caryll she could speak freely. For if she were the lady whom he took her to be, she could only be present here in the hotel, seeking out Caryll, for one purpose. And the information which presumably she wished to impart to his friend might be of urgency.

It was up to him, therefore, to impress upon her that she could repose all confidence in him, and yet do it both plausibly and diplomatically. He could not be

certain that she was indeed the girl he thought she was, even though he felt fairly positive, and if she were of the other camp, then it behoved him to walk warily.

She was still looking at him, no smile now on her face, evidently waiting for him to leave her. He thought he detected the slightest glint of annoyance in her eyes, though she showed otherwise no hint of discomposure. Had the matter not been one of such importance, Wilson might have lost himself in contemplation of her prettiness, even enhanced now by the very slight, scarcely noticeable frown which had appeared momentarily on her forehead.

"Please excuse me for butting in like this," he said, with a smile. "I happen to know that my friend Caryll may be away some time. He is on important business. Can I give him any message?"

The frown deepened. For a moment he thought she would not answer him; then she evidently changed her mind.

"He'll be away for how long?"

"Certainly until lunch-time."

This information did not please her. There was a moment's pause while he waited patiently for her to speak.

"I can't wait that long, and I can't come back today."

Wilson smiled again. Her remark was evidently scarcely meant for him, but was more of an outspoken thought.

"As a medium for the transference of messages," he said, "I am both accurate and at your service."

She smiled again. Evidently he had struck the right note with her. Wilson caught himself once more admiring those parted lips, those shining teeth.

"You said you were a friend of Mr. Caryll's?"

"Not only I say so, but also the clerk at the office over there will corroborate. May I point out that I am staying at the hotel, and that the clerk has been in the employ of this hotel for some time and is therefore unlikely to be on the staff of your enemies?"

"My enemies?"

"In the unlikely, quite incredible to me, possibility of your having any."

She laughed outright. The ice was broken, and Wilson sat down on a chair beside her.

"You put that very nicely," she said. "But you do understand that I had to be careful?"

"My dear lady, of course. Finally to convince you, if you care to ask the head waiter in the restaurant behind you, he will inform you that Caryll, myself, and a man whom I believe you have met, a Frenchman who answers to the name of Dubonnet, all had breakfast together here this morning."

"You know who I am?"

"Practically. That sounds funny, but I mean that I'm pretty sure. You are the American lady who paid an involuntary visit for several days to a man whose identity Caryll is now in Paris to establish?"

She laughed again. Wilson watched her in complete content. Her whole expression was lit up with humour; the spectacle was pleasing. The man thanked Providence that he had yielded to his first impulse and al-

lowed himself to be brought to Caryll's visitor instead of merely leaving instructions that the man whom she had come to see was not at the moment available.

Suddenly she became serious. She turned round and looked at him closely. Wilson got the impression that he was being scrutinised in order to decide whether he were wholly to be trusted. The experience was unusual, and, to say the least, not particularly pleasant.

He waited, however, for her to speak. There was no point in breaking in upon her thoughts. One false word might ruin the impression which had caused her to thaw towards him, an impression which he flattered himself might bring forth the reason for her visit. And he was extremely anxious to do this. The matter might well be of importance, perhaps start a new line of thought on which to work—an event now more than ever to be desired, since the man they were after had destroyed the person of their only link with him or any of his gang.

Abruptly she made up her mind. She told the story in a low voice, but every word was distinct to the listening man in the next chair. She told it bluntly, not sparing herself, not sparing anything.

"My name," she said, "is Patricia Daly. Maybe you knew?"

"No," Wilson assured her. "As matter of fact, Dubonnet never mentioned either your name or your father's. He called him the American."

She smiled.

"I'm afraid Mr. Dubonnet is angry with my poor father for having ransomed me. It's just as well he

did, though. Listen, Mr. Wilson. When I told the police I was happy in my bedroom prison, I only told them half the truth."

She paused. This was in the nature of a confession, that was obvious. But it promised to be a confession of the utmost interest, and Wilson prompted her.

"Yes?"

"Promise you won't tell anyone?"

Wilson felt awkward. This was a promise he obviously could not make. There might be something in the girl's story which could be of the utmost use, and he must be free to make the best use of it.

"Except to Mr. Caryll, of course."

He saw a loop-hole.

"I'll certainly promise to tell what I hear only to Victor Caryll, Miss Daly. But I cannot answer for Caryll's silence as well."

"You'll understand well enough why I want silence," she went on quickly, "when I've told you my story. Will you answer for Mr. Caryll that he won't—broadcast my secret? He may have to tell some folks, so's to make use of it, but he'll make sure those people won't speak?"

Wilson smiled.

"Of that you may rest absolutely sure," he said. "Caryll's discretion is entirely to be trusted."

"I heard that, when we were in London last fall."

"You know Caryll?"

The girl smiled.

"Not personally. But I met some friends of his—a couple named Ackland. He'd done something for

them, and they just loved him. So when Dad said that Mr. Caryll was on the case, I thought I'd come and see him."

"You were quite right."

She paused again. Evidently this tale which she was about to tell was one which she scarcely knew how to begin. All at once Wilson felt sorry for her. There was little doubt that her story was intimate, and, as such, a difficult one to relate to a complete stranger.

Suddenly she looked up, straight at him, and smiled. Wilson felt somehow that he had been complimented; by her simple action the girl seemed to have indicated her trust.

"Almost as soon as I was released," she began, "Mr. Dubonnet came to interview me. Do you know what I told him?"

Wilson nodded.

"Well, up to a point it was true. I mean, I told him only one falsehood, and that to him was a matter of no importance. He asked me if I had been happy and well-treated, and I said that I had."

"Hadn't you?"

"Up to a point, yes. I mean that during most of my stay in that bedroom I was naturally anxious, but perfectly well looked after. It was only for the last hour that I had such an awful time."

The girl shuddered. The recollection of what had happened obviously affected her even now, several days after the occurrence.

"One hour before I was eventually released, al-

though of course I knew nothing of that at the time, the door which was really a lift opened, and a man came in. I was terrified. He was in full evening dress —tails and a white waistcoat and all that. I'm sure he had on a white tie as well, but that I couldn't see because, drawn over his head, he was wearing a hood made of green silk, which came down over his shoulders. But all his clothes fitted him perfectly— so well that I'm certain he was not the sort of man who would wear anything but a white tie with a tail-coat. He behaved in the most extraordinary way. He told me to sit down, and to prepare myself for a shock. He said that my father had behaved foolishly, and had tried to trap him in paying the ransom. He explained to me, so plausibly that I almost believed him, that interference with his plans could not be tolerated, for the good of his gang. He could not allow them to be betrayed into capture by the police. He said he was therefore regretfully compelled to make an example of me. Oh, I just hated that horrible man!"

Wilson found himself hating the man also, hating him for frightening this sweet girl. There was one thing, however, for which he thanked him; the fellow's conduct had obviously been unspeakably mean, yet without it Patricia Daly might never have been known to him.

"Well," she continued, "after he'd said that, he just stood and watched me. I felt sick; I wanted to fall on my knees and implore him to spare me, but my pride saved me. Thank God I didn't! After a bit he told me that he did not wish to be unduly hard on me.

He was sorry he had to take my life, as he admired me. However, business was business. The callous way in which he was talking gave me some spirit; I now wanted to fly at him.

"He put a sheet of paper, an envelope, and a fountain pen on the table in front of me. Then he told me that he would come back in half an hour, and that if I wanted to write a farewell letter to anyone other than my family, he'd see that it was posted. That, he said, with a wink for which I could have killed him, would be my last chance."

She leant over towards Wilson in her emotion.

"Mr. Wilson, what could I do but believe him? I sat down and wrote a letter—a very foolish letter. I wrote to a man in my home town in America, a man my family had brought me to Europe to forget. It wasn't a love-letter, it was the reverse. But I told that young man in it just what I thought of him."

She paused, watching the effect of her words. Wilson, slightly puzzled, asked a question.

"Why worry, then?"

"Because," went on the girl, "I referred to an incident in the letter which nobody knows about, the time that I found that young man out. He had asked me to spend a week-end at his home, to become acquainted with his people. I had to tell Dad I was staying with a girl friend to get away. He called for me in his roadster, and until I got into the country, miles away from anywhere, I didn't realise that he was only taking me to—to an hotel. I got away, never mind how, but not until the evening. I couldn't get home, couldn't do anything. I wandered about trying

to find somewhere to stay the night, but there didn't seem to be any place. I slept in a wood, and the next day I found the railroad and got back home. But I didn't say anything to anyone. My people had arranged to take me to Europe two days later, so I didn't think it worth while troubling anyone. I told this young man in that letter just what I thought of him, told him just what he'd made me do."

She paused. Wilson was all attention, and she noticed it.

"Listen!" she said. "I certainly put it strongly. I wasn't going to die without showing him what I thought of him. Then in came Mr. Green-Hood again. He was jaunty, as if relieved. He said he was terribly glad to have to tell me that at the last moment my father had paid the bill. Would I please come with him, as I was to be returned to him? Was I pleased? I should just say so! I hopped after him like a gazelle on wings, and I forgot all about that letter on the table."

Wilson was beginning to see light; but he made no comment.

"Yesterday," she went on, "I got this letter. Cast your eye over it."

Wilson took the proffered sheet of notepaper. It was a pale shade of green, and he unfolded it to read, not without a certain premonition that he already guessed the sense of the infamous script:

"Dear Miss Daly," he read. *"It was recently my privilege to entertain you at this my poor abode. Dur-*

ing the time that you were with me, I can assure you that all my resources were in operation to secure your comfort. I trust you enjoyed your stay as much as the rather cramped circumstances would permit.

"I am afraid that you were rather led astray by a certain incident, well known to you, just before you left me. You were ill-advised enough to leave behind you a letter which, I frankly confess, has intrigued me greatly.

"What a brute that young man must be! It would serve him right if the whole incident were to be exposed. Of course, with newspapers you can never tell, and there might be a risk in it. Reports are often inaccurate, and it would be unfortunate, from your point of view, if any small inaccuracy should creep into this report. It would mean a public denial, and denials are so seldom believed, are they?

"It has occurred to me that the best place for your letter would be a nice, bright, coal fire. Don't you agree? The sum of one hundred thousand francs (100,000 fcs.) will ensure your immunity.

"I should like an early reply, if you please. Say in seven days from now, at the usual place in the Bois de Boulogne, you yourself only with the money in notes, and at ten p. m. precisely. Provided that you are entirely unattended, I give you my word that no harm will come to you.

"Should you fail to keep this appointment, however, I shall be compelled once more to invite you for a stay in my domain. And if this unfortunate curtailment of your liberty should take place, it will cost your father

just twice what he paid before to get you back again.

" I have the honour to be, dear lady,

"One of your most obedient servants.

"P. S.—Why not show this letter to your father? He is a business man after all; he will realise that the price of your virulent description of that horrible young man is only five per cent. of the price of your second ransom, should one be needed. Ever so much cheaper!

"P.P.S.—I understand that the name of your local rag is the New York Tribune. *Is this so?*

"P.P.P.S.—I shall certainly kick that unspeakable young man if I ever meet him.

"P.P.P.P.S.—Referring to my P.P.P.S., I shall take great pleasure in doing it."

Wilson looked up. He was surprised and a little relieved to see the girl was smiling at him, for he himself wanted to laugh rather badly. The supreme audacity which this curious blackmailer had shown, and was showing once again in the amazing communication which he had just read, was, even if regrettable, scarcely lacking in humour.

Suddenly Patricia Daly leant back in her chair and gave way to mirth. So did Wilson, but not quite so heartily. There was running at the back of his mind a feeling of admiration for this girl, who could see the humour even of her own troubles.

She recovered herself.

"Mr. Wilson," she said, still smiling, "that chap certainly has some nerve! I should rather like to meet him again. Well, what am I to do?"

"Have you told your father?"

"No. Dad wouldn't care for the fact that I'd told him a lie that time I went away. But, if I've got to, I will. I just thought that your friend Victor Caryll might see a way out."

"And so he might, dear lady!"

A well-known, almost falsetto voice behind them made both start involuntarily.

"Bill, I'm ashamed of you, old prohibitionist! Entertaining a lady without offering her some light, liquid refreshment? Poor! Bad! Hi, waiter!"

CHAPTER VIII

IT took Caryll very little more than the time to consume his cocktail to get the hang of Patricia Daly's story. One of his noble attributes had always been a very quick brain, and it was as well that this was so. The girl was due for luncheon with her father at the Ritz and could spare only a few minutes more.

She ran through the story very briefly for Vic's benefit, and then gave him the letter. He read it, closely watched by the other two to see what effect it would have on him.

Wilson expected to see him smile as he finished, but he did not do so. Instead he turned to Patricia Daly very seriously and asked her one question.

"Please take your time over your answer," he said, "because I am going to ask you a most important question. Did this green-hooded johnny have any ring on the fourth finger of his right hand?"

She looked at Caryll, a rather astonished expression on her face. He waited patiently for her to speak.

"Yes, he did."

"A signet ring?"

"Yes."

"Was there anything peculiar about it?"

Wilson, a silent witness to this interrogation, could not make out at what on earth his friend was getting.

But he knew him better than to break in on any line of thought.

"It was very big and . . ."

"Yes?"

"I'm not certain, but I think it was green—jade, or something like that."

An extraordinary change came over Caryll's face. He smiled, and from the rather serious, business-like person which he had been not a moment before, he suddenly changed into the genial, apparently happy-go-lucky Victor Caryll so well known to all his friends.

"By gad! I'm convinced it is he!"

The ejaculation suddenly brought comprehension to Wilson. He cursed himself for having failed to see it coming, and he also laughed. A green jade signet ring, a large one at that! Just the sort of ring that had once deceived him into thinking that Derek Sinclair, its owner, was dead. Wilson sat up in his chair abruptly in his excitement.

"I'll bet that Sinclair isn't wearing that ring before strangers any more, now that he knows we're on the job!" laughed Caryll happily. "I'm in luck, old toadstool! The second round is about to start, and I'm just aching for the timekeeper to give the word 'Go'!"

"What am I to do?" asked a small, rather startled voice at his side.

Caryll jumped. In his excitement he had forgotten the presence of the girl. He turned towards her.

"My dear, I'm awfully sorry! I'd forgotten about your troubles just for a moment. You can bet your last dollar I won't again, though I was rather carried

away by recognising in your pal an old . . . well, an old sparring partner. It seems we're going to have another scrap."

He rubbed his hands together meditatively, evidently highly elated by the prospect. Wilson caught himself wondering if Derek Sinclair was quite as pleased.

Caryll was taking his time in answering her question, but the American girl said nothing and just watched him. Wilson found a new inspiration for his admiration in this fact. Evidently she had sized up the man pretty shrewdly, and had no intention of interfering with his line of thought. Few girls could have restrained themselves in this manner, and waited, with such patience, for an answer which was of such importance.

So thought Bill Wilson.

Abruptly Caryll leant over to the girl, and took one of her hands in his. The girl smiled at him without any attempt to withdraw it.

"Listen, my dear." Caryll's voice was low but distinct. "You asked me what to do, and I'm going to tell you. Nothing! Just carry on with your ordinary life, but don't leave Paris. If at the end of the six days which remain to you I haven't collared this laddie and flattened him out properly, then I'll let you know and there'll be nothing for it but a full confession to your poppa. But I don't think there'll be any necessity for that. I've got something to work on at last. Now, have you got that clear?"

She laughed.

"I certainly have. All right, Mr. Caryll, I'll do nothing. And when you want me you can get me at the Ritz."

She got up to go, but Caryll gently pushed her back into her chair.

"Did I hear you call me Mr. Caryll, Patricia?" he asked.

She hesitated, and the faintest tinge of a deeper red flooded her face, enhancing its loveliness.

"I . . . I believe you did, Victor."

"That was a mistake, Pat."

"Yes, Vic."

"We'd better leave it at that," said Caryll with a smile," otherwise we'll be calling each other nothing at all."

She laughed, and the two men laughed with her.

"My name's Bill," ventured Wilson.

"Isn't it bad luck!" laughed Caryll, "but his other name is Wilson. You can call him that if you like. Going?"

The girl had risen. For the first time Caryll and his friend were able to admire the graceful curves of her figure. Wilson realised almost with a shock that if her face were lovely and attractive, then the rest of her in no way fell from the high standard.

They saw her out of the door and into the Sûreté car, which had been lent to Caryll and which he insisted should take her back to the Ritz.

Then, turning, Vic seized his friend by the arm.

"Old bird!" he cried. "We're off! The starter's dropped his flag, the tape's gone up, the bullet's been

ejected by the powder! That ring is the one missing link, the thing that makes it certain. Seconds out, old cherub! I'm about to take the gloves off!"

He rushed his friend back to the lounge, back to the chairs which they'd been occupying.

"Listen. I went along to Anne's flat, and I couldn't get in. The *concierge* was surprised, said he thought the lady was in. I've no doubt she was, too; but either she wasn't dolled up to see me or she had some other visitors. Anyway, I gave it up after a bit. That's why I got back early. Thank God I did!"

"Why?"

"Why? Are you a damned fool, or merely a fool as I've always suspected?" Caryll laughed good-naturedly, which took all the sting out of his words. "Because, you old rogue, I was just in time to prevent you monopolising for good and all one of the most charming exports of God's own country!"

Wilson smiled.

"But seriously, old cherub," Caryll went on, "the real reason was that Miss Pat gave me just that clue I've been after. She was able to produce, in her description of that signet ring, the one link which goes to prove that what I've suspected all along is true. Consider these suspicions for a moment."

He paused, and raised his right hand, tapping the thumb smartly with the forefinger of the left.

"Act One," he said, "Dubonnet's office at the Sûreté. We are told of a johnny who possesses no honesty but a certain humour. This johnny is well educated, and is probably English, Scotch, Irish, or Welsh. He

isn't American, because he doesn't spell that way. He uses pale green notepaper. Now this last may be but a slender thread, but it's just these slender threads that lead to half the arrests in this world. I knew—you should have known—that Derek Sinclair likes green. That ring of his proves it. And we know perfectly well that he is well educated, is English, and also has a sense of humour."

He paused, but only momentarily, to allow the significance of his words to sink in.

"Act Two, your visit to Anne. Now, I don't believe, knowing Anne, that she could possibly have fallen in two years to the original of the description of her which you gave me. She was always much too proud, much too careful of herself, and much too sensible. But I can see the idea behind it all. If you were once more working with me—and of that they couldn't be sure then, although they were suspicious—it was just as well from their point of view to attempt to prove to us that Derek Sinclair was not yet returned from his hiding-place. Anne in such a state would lend force to her denial of your question on the point—which was bound to come. All the same, Anne in such a deplorable state does not convince me.

"That is why, in Act Three, I go myself to see her, choosing an unexpected moment. Just what I think might happen does happen. My visit is too unexpected altogether, and it is inconvenient for me to be admitted. Therefore I can't get in, although the *concierge* downstairs has not noticed the lady go out."

He stopped.

For a while Wilson watched him, but then his anxiety fully to share in his friend's conclusions overcame his patience:

"Is there an Act Four?"

"There is an epilogue," said Caryll, smiling, "and as in all good epilogues the play which has just been presented is run over briefly and summarised in the light of what has happened, this epilogue is true to type. What has happened before has made me suspicious; what happened just now has made me certain. Patricia Daly has informed us that the green-hooded joker wore a large green jade signet ring on his right hand—on the fourth finger of his right hand. All I say is this: thanks very much. That's enough for me. I know other people wear signet rings, even green jade signet rings, and even occasionally on the fourth finger of their right hands, but—well, not many crooks, anyway."

Wilson watched his friend closely. Victor Caryll's voice had dropped rather low, but a passion of intensity welled out with every word, a fierce sort of joy seemed to radiate from him as he spoke the last few words. Evidently he had made up his mind on the point. To him the case had ceased to be an ordinary job in the ordinary way of business. He was now, having established for himself the identity of the man he was up against, a very different Caryll from the one who might be met with in routine work. The personal element had entered into the matter, the rivalry which adds zest to the chase.

Caryll, leaning back in his chair, lazily exhaling the

smoke from a cigarette, surveyed through half-closed eyes the wall and the ceiling of the hotel lounge. But he saw neither of these perfectly tangible things. His thoughts had raced back with him to one night two years before—an evening in a restaurant in London when Bill Wilson had come to him from Biarritz with a message. That message, though indirect, had been sent by that very man Sinclair up against whom he now felt certain he was, and it had provoked him into a remark which he now remembered very clearly. "Next time," he had said, "we start square."

Caryll closed his eyes for one moment, the more to realise his good fortune. Throughout the past two years he had been waiting for this moment, for the renewal of hostilities, with as much patience as he could muster. Now that it had come, he allowed himself the luxury of just a few moments in order to give full satisfaction to his sense of anticipatory thrill, of impending excitement.

"By heaven!" he exclaimed suddenly, "I'll get him this time."

And those words were the only words which his friend Wilson ever heard from the lips of Victor Caryll which, no matter how perfectly justified, could in any way be interpreted as displaying any sign of personal venom towards the subject of either thought or sentence.

When the moment of retrospection was over, Caryll, once more himself, sat up, the old alertness evident not only in his eyes, but also in the whole poise of his giant frame.

"Wilson, Bill, assistant-in-chief and honorary helpmate," he said, the faintest suggestion of a smile in his voice and eyes, "to-night you and I, and possibly our rotund little friend M. Dubonnet, are going to pay a surprise visit to Anne. And we are going to be admitted. If we are not, then we shall admit ourselves. I should like to get into touch with our erstwhile friend Mr. Derek Sinclair, who, I am convinced, is in Paris and at the back of this show. And what better method than by calling on his wife? She won't tell us anything, of course: but the flat may."

He paused, looked at Wilson inquiringly, and then smiled.

"Your turn, I think?"

"My turn?"

"Indisputably."

Wilson, a blank expression on his face, stared at his friend.

"One for the road, old fantail. We're just getting started now, you know. We must wish ourselves the very best of luck!"

Wilson laughed, and beckoned to a waiter.

"That's the idea!" said Caryll, "and while you are giving directions to our friend here as to the precise beverage in which we are about to propitiate the Fates into a kindly surveillance over us by drinking to their healths, I will just telephone to the Sûreté. They say a watched pot never boils, but, on the other hand, a watched woman sometimes leads one to discoveries. Our little friend Anne had better give us, quite unwittingly, all the information which we can get from

her movements. I am sure M. Dubonnet will be only too pleased to put someone on to trail her."

With that Caryll rose and rapidly walked over to the office of the hotel, there to close himself inside a telephone booth.

Wilson, in the meantime, ordered a couple of very dry Martinis.

The clock on the hotel lounge pointed to exactly thirty-two minutes after one. And at just this hour an American returned to his private suite at the Ritz, there to receive a rude shock.

CHAPTER IX

THE car lent to Victor Caryll by Dubonnet deposited Patricia Daly at the door of the Ritz. Thanking the chauffeur prettily for his trouble, the girl ran up the steps into the straggling lounge and looked around her quickly. There were very few people about, and one glance was sufficient to inform her that the man she was seeking was not present. She went straight over to the elevator and was taken to her room.

Here she threw off her hat and coat, dallied for a moment before the looking-glass, arranging a refractory wisp of hair, and then moved over to the door which communicated with the adjoining room.

This she unlocked, at the same time knocking gently.

There came no answer. She opened the door, but only a very little way, and peeped through the crack thus made. The room was empty.

She hesitated, standing perfectly still, listening. There came no sound. Abruptly making up her mind, she entered the room.

It presented no unusual feature. There were many hundreds of just such rooms in the giant hotel, and those in occupation must have appeared very much the same as this one. It was occupied, evidently, by a man. Hairbrushes and a comb, together with a bottle of some hair lotion, adorned the dressing-table; and at

the washing-basin let into the wall a safety razor and the usual appliances were clearly to be seen.

Patricia looked about her quickly, noting that everything which she expected to see was in its accustomed place. Then, a slight frown on her pretty forehead, she started a rapid but fairly systematic search for what she scarcely expected to find; scarcely knew, in fact, for what it was she was looking.

But there was something hidden in that room, something of value. Or so she suspected, and she was determined to find out what it was.

She opened every drawer, and examined very carefully every article within. Afterwards she replaced all in precisely the position which they had originally occupied. She worked rapidly and dexterously.

The drawers failed to yield anything out of the usual. She then turned her attention to the hanging cupboard, and went through every pocket in every suit of clothes which she found therein. Every one she found to be empty.

She looked at the small diamond watch which adorned her slender wrist. The hands informed her that her search had been useless; it was very nearly half-past one, and at that hour she had agreed to meet the tenant of that very room for lunch.

With one last rapid survey to make sure that everything was as it should be, as it had been before she had entered the room, she returned to her own and locked the communicating door once more. Then she again proceeded by the elevator, returning to the lounge.

The large clock which met her eyes as she left the lift told her that it was twenty-nine minutes past one. She smiled to herself at the recollection of her hurry when with Victor Caryll, her hurry to get back to the Ritz, in order, as she had said, to lunch with her father at one.

A glance at the occupants of the lounge satisfied her that the man was not yet come. She sat down in an adjacent chair, and, picking up a paper, idly turned over the pages whilst she waited.

It was not long before an elderly, well-dressed man entered the lounge, and, seeing her, advanced to the table where she was sitting.

"Well, my dear?"

She looked up and smiled.

That smile of Patricia Daly's had already had effect on Victor Caryll and also on Bill Wilson. Now it had its usual effect for the third time. The man smiled back, and there was something of relief in his expression as he drew a chair to the table and sat down.

"You saw him?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And was he . . . nice to you?"

Patricia looked at her questioner with a faintly amused expression.

"He was extremely nice," she said.

"And helpful?"

"Very."

The man laughed—a short, satisfying sound. He said nothing more for a few moments, but just sat staring at the girl.

"I am not surprised," he said suddenly. "It has always appeared to me, my dear, that no man could ever resist your charms. You were, no doubt, very charming?"

Patricia smiled.

"What are you getting at, Dad? D'you want me to pay a compliment to myself and say that I behaved only as I always do?"

"Perhaps," returned the other. "I put the question clumsily. I intended to convey to you that I hoped, acting on my instructions, that you had made a very full use of your natural attraction."

The girl bowed mockingly.

"If you mean did I get off," she said archly, "well, I don't know. Future events will clear up that point. By the way, there's something I'd like to say to you."

"Yes?"

Patricia looked at her father full in the eyes.

"Everyone knows," she said, "that you are an American millionaire who has lived most of your life in England. Everyone does not know, however, that Americans sometimes use the same expressions—idioms, if you like—as Englishmen. Well, it seems to me that it would certainly be a good thing not to talk too . . . too Englishy. What do you think?"

The man looked around him quickly.

"Pat," he said earnestly in a low tone, "even if we are alone, for heaven's sake don't say things like that in public places. It . . . it unnerves me!"

The girl laughed lightly.

"Let us have a bite of food, Dad, dear. I'm starv-

ing! You were a bit after half-past one as it is; and, anyway, that's late for lunch in France!"

"Very well."

The man spoke rather tersely, as if slightly annoyed. But the girl evidently worried not at all over this; and in a very few minutes it was plain that she was absolutely right not to do so, for her companion very soon recovered his complacence.

The father and daughter made their way to the lift, and were taken up to the floor on which Patricia's room was situated—the room in which she had been such a very short time previously. Two doors from her room, however, they stopped and entered a private dining-room, with the table already laid for luncheon for two. Two doors communicated with this dining-room, the first opening into the millionaire's bedroom, the second into a sitting-room. This was the suite which the American had taken.

"Half a minute, dear."

The man disappeared into his room. The girl walked quietly into the sitting-room and gazed out of the window. The view was a pleasant and animated one, as it looked out on to the famous Place Vendôme, with its many pedestrians attempting to avoid the almost constant flow of motor vehicles of every description.

Patricia was, she confessed to herself as she looked out with unseeing eyes, just a little worried. She sincerely hoped that her father would notice nothing out of the ordinary in his bedroom.

A moment's reflection, however, put her at her ease. She had made a thorough if rapid search, and before

she had left she had carefully assured herself that nothing was out of place. She had no reason to fear any suspicion at all on the part of John Daly that anyone had entered his room during the time that he had been absent.

Any doubt that might have remained was removed a moment later by his return, evidently now in the best of spirits.

"I've telephoned for lunch to be sent up at once, my dear. I'm sorry I was late. Couldn't help it, as a matter of fact. There was a good deal of business to attend to, and I had to stay and finish it."

"Dad, why do you . . ."

She stopped abruptly at a sign from her father. A key turning in the lock of the dining-room had been heard by his sharp ears.

"Ah! Here is lunch, my dear. Shall we go and start?"

To her, his voice sounded unnecessarily loud, rather as if he intended to make quite sure that the waiter should hear what he had said. She smiled to herself.

They went into the adjoining room and sat down to their meal. During the whole of luncheon they talked of trivialities, of everyday incidents common to everyone, and never once referred to Caryll or to the kidnapper known by his own method of signing as the Obedient Servant. It was only after lunch, when they had returned to the sitting-room and coffee had been served, that John Daly introduced the matter.

The door closed behind the waiter who had brought

the coffee, and a moment later the noise of the outer door being shut came to their ears.

Then, almost at once, John Daly spoke.

"What did you say to Caryll?"

The girl looked at him, raising her eyes only, with her cup still to her lips. This she lowered slowly.

"Dad," she said after a momentary pause, and in a determined tone of voice, "what's all the mystery about?"

The man sat up impatiently.

"Haven't I told you often enough, Patricia, that I don't want you to ask questions? It'll all be cleared up very shortly, and then you'll understand everything. Up till then—you promised you'd keep your mouth shut and your curiosity bottled."

"I know. But I've had to do such strange things. Can't you give me just an inkling . . . some little hint? It would make it all so much more interesting for me."

The man laughed shortly, rather mirthlessly.

"Possibly. But you are not here to be interested. You are here to keep your bargain and do as you are told. You're not going to break your word, are you?"

Patricia, a troubled frown on her white forehead, shook her head doubtfully.

"Of course not."

For a few moments the man looked thoughtfully at her. He was not lost in admiration of the beautiful face, its loveliness enhanced now by that very slight frown and the hesitating expression in her eyes. In point of fact, he did not see her except in a general

sort of haze, although he was looking straight at her. John Daly was face to face with a crisis, and he knew it.

Suddenly, he almost jerked himself from his thoughts, his mind made up. He would treat this rather troublesome but extremely valuable ally as he had often before treated her in similar circumstances. Now that he had determined on a course of action, he lost no time in putting it into effect.

"Patricia girl," he said, his voice low and earnest, "when, a year ago, I adopted you and pulled you out of the trouble you'd got yourself into, I did so partly out of pity, but also because I thought you were one of the most lovely creatures I'd ever seen. Since then you've lived in the lap of luxury, had everything you wanted, done everything you felt inclined to do. Haven't you?"

The girl was staring at the floor, leaning back in her chair and now, with a definitely worried expression on her face:

"Yes," she acknowledged softly.

"Well, this is the first time that I've asked you to do something for me in return. You've done it all right—you're still doing it—but you will keep on asking questions. There'll come a time—soon, I hope—when you can ask any question you want to, and I'll answer the lot. But now—well, I don't want you to ask about anything. I know it's always difficult, but . . . you promised not to, didn't you? Business is inevitably difficult, sometimes mysterious."

The girl looked up sharply.

"What has business to do with two Englishmen in Paris, and a kidnapper?"

John Daly laughed.

"Isn't that another question?"

For a moment the girl was nonplussed. A few minutes before she had had the man in a nervous condition, when possibly, had she pursued her inquiries quickly, she might have obtained some inkling of the knowledge which she desired. Now, however, she knew his tone and manner only too well. He was himself again, in full possession of his wits.

She smiled to him, hoping that her smile was sufficiently natural to give him the impression that, temporarily at least, she was satisfied.

"I suppose it is," she said lightly.

"No more questions, my dear. No more until I tell you to fire away and I'm ready to answer anything. Now tell me about your interview with Caryll."

She thought there was a note of relief in his voice, which amused her inwardly. However, for the moment her chance was gone. There was nothing to do but resume the normal relationship.

"When I first got to the hotel," she said, "Caryll wasn't in, so I just sat down to wait. After a few minutes Wilson came up and introduced himself. He said that Caryll wasn't in, and that if I had anything of importance to communicate I could trust him."

"You recognised Wilson?"

"Oh, yes; it was the right man all right. But I pretended to be extremely careful at first, and finally to be convinced."

She drained her cup of coffee.

"Might I have a liqueur?"

John Daly jumped up.

"My dear, I'm so sorry. Cointreau as usual?"

"Please."

He moved over to a cupboard and, opening it, took out two glasses and a bottle of the liqueur. He filled the glasses, returned the bottle to the cupboard, and retraced his steps bearing the glasses.

"Thanks. Well, I told him the story as you had told me to tell it. It went well."

"You are sure?"

"Absolutely. Before I had finished, Caryll arrived himself. I gave him a quick outline, and asked what to do. He said 'Do nothing.' He said he'd get to work, but if he failed, then there was nothing for it but a full confession . . . to you!"

They both laughed.

"Anything else?"

"No, nothing else."

"He didn't ask any questions?"

"Wait a minute. I don't think so."

The girl thought carefully for a moment. She was troubled by an attempt to understand the significance of that question which Caryll had asked her at the end of their interview. Why had he suspected the possibility of a large green signet ring, a ring which, as she had acknowledged, she had actually seen, and why had he seemed so pleased when she had told him about it?

She determined that the question, and her answer to

it, had been trivial matters in comparison with the rest of the conversation, and that she would do herself no harm by telling of them.

"He did ask me one question. He asked if the man whom I had seen when I was kidnapped wore a large green signet ring on the fourth finger of his right hand, and I said that he did."

"What!"

The word was almost shouted, and the girl shrank back involuntarily. She stared with a feeling of mingled horror and apprehension at the man leaning forward in front of her. John Daly was unusually pallid, and his eyes, boring into her own, seemed suddenly to have become menacing and full of a curious look which she was unable to define.

The outbreak had been abrupt. Almost as abruptly the man recovered himself.

"I . . . I must telephone. Wait here. I won't be long."

He got up with surprising agility for a man of his age and almost ran from the room.

Then, and then only, did Patricia suddenly recognise the look that had existed, even if only for a moment, in those eyes which had stared almost with malignity into her own.

John Daly had been violently startled—of that there could be no possible doubt. But also he had been mortally afraid.

CHAPTER X

VICTOR CARYLL rejoined Wilson in the lounge of the hotel, and taking up the cocktail which the latter had ordered for him, drained it at one gulp.

"Quality fair, quantity disappointing!" he announced with a smile, as he replaced the now-empty glass on the tray. "Come on, old fellow; Dubonnet has been gracious enough to be really interested in my conclusions, and I have asked him to lunch with us at old Philippe's. We must be getting along."

The pair left the hotel, and in five minutes had walked the intervening distance to the restaurant. They found that Dubonnet had not yet arrived, and having chosen a table, they sat down to await the arrival of the Chief of the Paris Sûreté. A waiter proffered a *menu,* but Caryll waved him away.

"We shall be three," he said, "and Monsieur Philippe can choose a lunch infinitely better than any man I know. Let him go to it."

Dubonnet arrived at that moment, and the three set to their meal.

When the coffee was served, Dubonnet referred for the first time to the incidents of the morning.

"Your conversation," he said, turning to Caryll, "on the telephone was interesting. You think you know with whom we have to deal?"

"I am almost certain," said Caryll simply.

"I have despatched two of my best men to the address which you gave me. No one will leave without our knowing where they have gone to. But do you propose to raid the house?"

"Yes," said Caryll, "I do. And the sooner the better. That flat may give us some clue."

"True, monsieur. But do you not think that the possible clue may not be worth the while? For if we raid his wife, then this man will know for certain that we know who he is."

To Wilson there seemed more than an element of truth in this suggestion. However, he remained silent in order to hear what Victor Caryll had to say.

Vic smiled.

"That is perfectly sound," he replied, "except for one thing. To follow my argument you must assume, as I have done, that Derek Sinclair is at the bottom of this affair—is, in fact, your Obedient Servant. Well, if that be so, what conclusion do I come to? I know for a certainty that my presence on this case in Paris is known to this man. He knows, too, that I am on the look-out for him in everything that I take on at the moment. He's about due to turn up again, you know. Therefore, now that he knows I'm on the case, the first thing he will do is to remove all possible traces of any lines of communication. Anne is a very important line of communication. I'll bet you that if I'm not quick she'll be away, with all traces wiped out, by to-morrow at latest. Therefore, up and at her at once."

"Up and at her?"

It was Wilson who made the query.

"Yes, Bill, old bird. And I mean what I say."

Caryll was very serious.

"See here, Dubonnet," he said. "Can you arrest and hold Anne Sinclair on suspicion of being implicated in this kidnapping business?"

The Frenchman smiled.

"I can," he said, "but wouldn't it be better to keep her under surveillance and let her lead us . . . to him?"

"That she will never do," said Wilson in a tone of conviction.

"I agree," Caryll laughed. "You don't know either the lady or the man, old chap. We do. They are too clever for that. No! My idea is that, with her under lock and key, we may be able to trade. After all, the first objective is the apprehension of this johnny who signs himself our Obedient Servant. But I imagine, M. Dubonnet, that a pleasant preliminary from the point of view of the Sûreté would be the release of the two ladies at present in captivity. Am I right?"

Dubonnet sighed.

"It is very desirable," he said slowly. "The papers are becoming more and more openly insulting. Their correspondence columns are full of letters which now do not bother to veil the writers' opinions of the inefficiency of the Sûreté. Jokes—bitter, cynical jokes—even are being made about us."

He paused.

"Cheer up, old buffer!" suddenly cried Caryll. "Shall we go and apprehend the lady at once?"

"It would be better," said Dubonnet, "if we waited until dark. There would then be less fuss. We do not want the public to know too much about this arrest, because if we trade, then the absence of any trial will seem peculiar. There will be more letters. I particularly do not want any more letters. And, my friends, she can't get away. Wherever she goes, my men will follow and report."

Caryll seemed doubtful. Dubonnet suddenly took out his watch and looked at it.

"And the difference in time is very small. It will be dark very shortly after four. It is now after half-past two. What do you say?"

Caryll looked up.

"Don't get huffy, M. Dubonnet," he said quietly, "if I seem to cast doubt on the ability of your shadowers. But I know my man, and you don't. The difference of one hour may just turn the scale. I should prefer to act—now."

Wilson watched Dubonnet as Caryll spoke. A slight frown made its appearance on his forehead, but instantaneously was gone. In that way only did the little Frenchman show his annoyance.

"Very well. I will return to the Sûreté and issue instructions. Will you go with the men?"

"We'll meet them there," said Caryll. "You don't mind, do you? But this fellow acts very quickly. I should like to make as sure of this arrest as I can."

Dubonnet nodded, and left rather abruptly.

"I fear," said Caryll, smiling to Wilson as the bill was paid, "that our fat little friend is just a trifle put

out. But I really can't help it. The last thing in the world that I intend to do is to let Anne slip through my fingers. Shall we move, old son? It will take us a few minutes to reach that delectable neighbourhood, the Champs Élysées."

It happened that as they left the restaurant, Victor Caryll looked at his watch, and noted that it was just a quarter to three. He would have given a great deal to have overheard a telephone conversation which at that very moment was taking place between the Ritz Hotel and a certain house in the region of Paris to which the two friends were making their way.

The hotel telephone operator had just made the connection, and a middle-aged man entered the box and closed the door carefully behind him.

"Hullo?" he said.

"Yes."

"You know who this is speaking?"

"Yes."

"There has been an accident. Details this evening at the usual place. Schedule B must come into force at once."

"That is most annoying."

Something in the tone of the voice which made the remark seemed to have a most disturbing effect on John Daly. He had not yet quite recovered from the shock which he had received when he had heard Patricia's remark. His face, never very rosy, was now pallid in the extreme. His brow was moist.

"All accidents are regrettable," he said irritably. "I'm sorry. I couldn't help it. Quite unavoidable."

"I shall be glad if that is so. Schedule B, then, at once. And I shall see you to-night?"

"Yes."

There was a moment's pause.

"Hi!" suddenly said Daly. "Don't ring off. I want you . . ."

He stopped and listened.

The click of the other receiver as it was hung up on the hook had come to his ears. The line was dead.

CHAPTER XI

JOHN DALY left the telephone box in a thoughtful frame of mind. He walked slowly through the lounge back towards the lift which a very short time before he had quitted in such a hurry. His limbs were working slowly, but his brain was working overtime.

He was forced to confess to himself that he had just sustained a very severe blow. He had said—to that other on the opposite end of the telephone wire—that it had been unavoidable. This he had felt obliged to do, but in his heart he knew well enough that that was a mere excuse. He should have warned Patricia against any mention of the ring.

It is the way with many men that when once they are in the wrong, excuses must be made. So with John Daly. That green jade ring was so small, and yet might mean so much, if Victor Caryll grasped its significance. Of that Daly, much to his regret, found little doubt in his own mind. Caryll he knew to be quick of perception and daring in action. Caryll, should he draw the conclusion which only a friendly miracle could prevent him from assuming, would probably act at once. By that small oversight, that almost justifiable omission to forbid Patricia to mention the ring, it was possible and even probable that Anne Sinclair would lose her liberty. The police might get her, might have already

got her. If not already, and if they were after her, then Schedule B would save her. But if his warning had been too late, he knew what to expect.

John Daly, rather to his surprise, found that he was sweating slightly. This annoyed him. He decided that at his age perhaps unexpected shocks such as he had just received were not advisable in the everyday routine. He decided also to solicit the aid of tobacco to steady his nerves, unfortunately still rather on edge. He extracted a large cigar from a case which he carried in his coat pocket, and drew out a box of matches. With one of these he lit the cigar and, always tidy, placed the match-stick in an ash-tray on a small lounge table which he passed. Daly was accustomed to the colour, and did not notice anything out of the ordinary. But a man sitting at the next table noticed the action and, getting up, picked up the match-stick.

"Say," he said to his wife, who was watching him, a tolerant smile on her lips, "isn't that pretty? A green match-stick! I certainly must get some of those."

Strangely big results come often from very small beginnings. The state of John Daly's mind as he reached the lift was none too easy; but had he realised the consequences of this one innocent, even commendable action, his unrest might have been doubled or even trebled.

As the elevator took him back to the floor on which his suite was situated, he suddenly realised that in the state of anxious suspense in which he found himself he could not spend a perfectly passive afternoon, doing nothing in particular. He determined on action—

anything, as long as he was occupied during the time which must elapse before his evening appointment with the man to whom he had telephoned. He decided to leave the hotel and get into the fresh air immediately.

He entered the suite, passed through the dining-room, and found Patricia standing by the windows of the sitting-room, idly looking out on to the Place Vendôme."

"My dear," he said, "have you made any plans for this afternoon?"

The girl turned and faced him. While he had been away she had been thinking over his sudden agitation and drawing for herself what conclusions she could from his strange behaviour. She saw him now quite himself again, in an almost miraculously short space of time; to all outward purposes, at least, as suave as he was always.

She was forced to confess that she admired this man, for whom she had, strangely enough, no feeling of affection. She had not, in her previous life, had much to do with the millionaires of her own nationality. But she was American enough to understand and admire in one of her compatriots so complete a mastery over self and situation that, whatever happened, the man remained unruffled. This attribute, she knew, was supposed to be confined to the British; but she knew, also of her own experience, that whilst most Britishers thoroughly deserved this tribute to their common-sense, yet this quality could be found also in a great many men of other nations, particularly in their cousins of the United States.

"I thought I might do a little shopping."

"Of course." Daly smiled pleasantly. He withdrew a note-case from his pocket and took from it a note for a thousand francs. "Here you are, my dear. A little present to make up for any . . . any unpleasantness on my part a few minutes ago."

Patricia took the note.

"Oh, thanks ever so much! You certainly are kind to me."

There was a momentary silence. Suddenly the man broke it.

"I think I'll just go out for a drive," he said. "D'you want the car, or can you manage with taxis?"

Something in his manner arrested her attention. He was evidently still anxious, even nervous. She frowned to herself, not outwardly but metaphorically.

"Dad," she said suddenly, "why should that ring mean so much? Who wears it?"

"Questions again?" The man smiled, but the smile was mirthless. "I really think, Patricia, that I shall have to fine you for every question that you ask in future!"

Daly made the remark in a bantering tone of voice, but the girl was quick to realise that the expression in his eyes as he was speaking was anything but playful.

"Sorry! But it's difficult, when you make me do things which are . . . well, seem dishonest anyway, and you won't explain."

John Daly took the girl's arm almost roughly.

"D'you want to go back and serve that sentence? Do you? Answer me quick!"

His voice was sharp, compelling. Patricia looked at him coldly, meeting his eyes squarely.

"Is that likely?"

"Very likely, if you don't do just exactly as you're told."

There was a long period of silence, while the two stared into each other's eyes. Patricia's were the first to drop.

"Oh, all right," she said.

A sigh escaped him, almost a hiss, as the air was exhaled from between his lips. But that was the only sign; he dropped her arm and was immediately as urbane as ever before.

"Even in business, my dear," he said rather coldly, "everything does not appear on the surface. Some things have to be carefully manœuvred, and sometimes the forces of Law are not on the side of the great business man. You are not expected to understand; but if you wish to continue to enjoy your present privileges —those of the adopted daughter of a very rich man who, I assure you, is very fond of you—then you will exercise a little more care in curbing your tongue. Have you everything you want?"

"Yes, everything."

"You do not require the car?"

"No."

"Very well. I think I shall go for a little drive. I shall not be back until late—until dinner-time. Let me see, we are dining early and going to a theatre?"

"Yes."

"Good! I shall be in plenty of time. *Au revoir,* my dear."

He blew her a kiss, and picking up a hat and a coat, left the room.

Just for one moment Patricia remained undecided. Then she ran to her room, seized a hat, which she thrust on her head with an entire absence of her usual care for appearances, and slipping her arms into her fur overcoat as she sped down the stairs, she arrived in the lounge just in time to see the large figure of John Daly disappear through the portals of the hotel into the place Vendôme.

She judged her moment carefully. The doors were of glass and she could see her father by adoption waiting on the kerb while his car, which had been signalled, drew up in front of him. He got into it, giving some instructions to the chauffeur as he did so. The car moved off.

Patricia waited until she judged that it was beyond recall. Then she was suddenly all action. She rushed to the doors, and fled through them, almost colliding with the door-keeper, who was returning to the lounge, having watched the millionaire's car becoming lost in the traffic.

"My father!" she cried to him, "has he gone? He's forgotten his note-case!"

"Pardon, mademoiselle." The man smiled; he admired this dainty American girl, and was always ready to help her and her very rich father, from whom a handsome present might be expected a little later on. "Yes, he has just gone in ze car."

"He needs his note-case," said Patricia firmly. "Do you know where he's gone?"

"Oui, mademoiselle. He say to ze chauffeur, 'Drive to ze Bois.' "

"The Bois? Then I may find him. A taxi, quick!"

The little Frenchman leapt to the order. In a moment a taxi had drawn up beside the girl. She turned to the driver, and in her best French told him to drive to the Bois as fast as he was able. This last was an unnecessary instruction.

The memory of that drive remained with Patricia for many days. She had been to England, and had once been to Brooklands. That drive reminded her of nothing so much as a race around the track, but with the ordinary everyday traffic of Paris thrown in just to add a little extra spice to the excitement.

They dashed up the Rue Castiglione, rushed round into the Rue de Tivoli, in this operation narrowly missing a massive motor-'bus, and were swallowed up in the swirl of circular traffic in the Place de la Concorde. Here occurred the first hitch, but it was only the driver of the taxi who thought of it in that light.

The traffic was being held up; and Patricia, daring to open her eyes again, found that her taxi had drawn up, separated only by one other vehicle from her father's car.

Immediately she thrust her head through the window. Fortunately the girl knew more than a smattering of French. In a very short time—before, in fact, the policeman had signalled to the traffic to proceed—Patricia had made it clear to her taxi-driver that she

wished him to follow the big Renault in front, not so near as to be observed, but quite near enough to obviate any risk of losing it in the maze of other cars.

She had scarcely returned to her seat when the traffic began to proceed. From the inside of the taxi she could see through the front windows, and could watch the Renault in front. Her taxi-driver was evidently a man possessed of both intelligence and discretion, for he was carrying out his instructions to the letter.

As they made the circuit of the Place de la Concorde, and, in the wake of the big Renault, turned up that magnificent thoroughfare the Champs Élysées, Patricia wondered within herself what it had been, that sudden impulse which was responsible for her present position. That she was doing a curious thing she made no attempt to disguise from herself; to quarrel with the source of her bread-and-butter, a source which frequently provided jam as well, was an act closely related to idiocy. Patricia well knew that she had only to do as she was told, and do it well, to retain a pleasant home and luxurious surroundings. But . . .

She reviewed her life from the moment that she had first met John Daly. She did not linger over these thoughts, for there was little over which really to dally. From her earliest recollections she had known no father nor mother, no family at all. She had been brought up well, at a celebrated school, out of the money provided by a trust established she did not know by whom. She had been thrown on to the world at the age of eighteen, with just enough money to live, and a great deal more innocence than was good for her.

The latter had quickly gone, especially in New York. Her beauty and attraction had been that innocence's greatest enemies.

Finally, in order to supplement her slender income, she had turned to robbery—at least, she had made one attempt. Sentenced as a first offender, the millionaire Daly had been in court and seen her face. Money, they say, will talk plainly—persuasively, anyhow. She had left that court a free girl, shortly to become the legalised adopted daughter of the great financier.

Why, then, was she spying on him? Patricia allowed herself the luxury of a purely personal and very private smile, staged entirely for herself. She had been asked to do many strange things in the last month. She had not been prevented from looking at and reading the French papers. She knew, as well, a great deal more about her now legal father than he ever suspected, and a good lot about his fortune. Whatever else she may have been, Patricia Daly was no fool.

Her curiosity had been aroused. Mention by Victor Caryll of that large green signet ring, a ring which she had seen worn once in just those circumstances which she had described to Caryll, had faintly interested her. But then that interest had changed with lightning speed into real curiosity on witnessing the instantaneous effect of her plain statement about it to John Daly.

Just as she had said to Caryll, so it had actually happened. The man wearing the great jade ring had talked to her, his head concealed by a hood of green silk so that she had been unable to see his features. The

conversation, as it had occurred and as she had reported it to Caryll, had been essentially different. But she had spoken the truth when she had denied all knowledge of the identity of the Obedient Servant.

Patricia realised that this sudden whim which had led her to shadow the big Renault in front and its occupant was crystallising into the discernment of the fact that what she really sought was the knowledge of who it was who owned that large green signet ring.

The Renault and the taxi had traversed the first long stretch, all uphill, of the Avenue des Champs Élysées, and were now passing round the Arc de Triomphe with its perpetual flame in honour of the unknown dead. Soon this was behind them as they continued on their way to the famous Bois.

Once again Patricia smiled to herself. Her thoughts were taking a new turn.

The next moment these were rudely shattered. The Renault in front suddenly drew up at the side of the road.

For one moment Patricia went through an agony of apprehension lest her driver should stop just behind. But she was lucky in the man; he went on past the Renault, and did not draw into the kerb for a good fifty yards. As they went by, Patricia caught a fleeting glimpse of John Daly standing beside his car, apparently giving certain instructions to the chauffeur.

The moment her taxi stopped, Patricia leapt out from it. A quick glance at the meter and a rapid unclasping of her bag were all that was necessary. She was gone in a moment, a note in the astonished driver's

hand sufficient more than to double the correct legal fare.

The man smiled, and made one remark, which, although it did not reach Patricia's ears, might well have caused her a moment of amusement had she not been so quick to leave him.

"Ah! these erring husbands," he said, "what a lot of trouble they give their poor little wives! *Ma foi!* I hope she catches him red-handed. The base one, to deceive a little angel like that!"

CHAPTER XII

THE Rue Picot is a small street, branching off from the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne, this avenue being the continuation of the Champs Élysées from the Arc de Triomphe on the way to the Bois itself. It was just opposite to this side street that John Daly had caused his chauffeur to stop the Renault.

Patricia was satisfied by one quick glance that she would be unlucky if, when she crossed the avenue, her father's chauffeur saw and recognised her. Patricia was a firm believer in her luck; she had no hesitation at all in leaving the shelter of the trees which lined the side-walk. This was essential, for she had seen that John Daly was already nearly across.

There was a good deal of traffic, and the girl found this to her liking, for it gave her the security of being able to avoid discovery in the unlikely event of her father looking round. The occasion did not arise, however; evidently the man had no idea that he was being followed, for he did not make any attempt to look behind him. She reached the opposite side-walk still some fifty yards behind him.

Patricia was beginning to enjoy herself; this shadowing business was, as she herself would have put it, a new game to her, and in its novelty there was attraction.

John Daly turned into the Rue Picot. Patricia did not know in the least that it was the Rue Picot. But as she approached the corner where she had last seen her father by adoption she looked up to the little blue disc on the corner house opposite, and noted mentally the name.

The Rue Picot does not run at right angles to the avenue of which it is a tributary, but slants slightly in such a way that a portion of it becomes visible to anyone approaching before that person actually reaches it. This was lucky for Patricia. She was still in the avenue when she stopped dead.

On the opposite pavement, and a few yards down the street, a little group had attracted her attention. Clearly distinguishable in the middle of it, the massive frame of Victor Caryll leapt to her eyes, and in the man next to him she recognised his friend, Bill Wilson.

Patricia realised at once that she was in a difficulty. John Daly, she knew, could and probably already had passed down the street, for he was not known by sight to either of the Englishmen. But unless she desired to invite recognition, it behoved her not to take even one step forward.

"Gee!" she said to herself, "this shadowing game surely is full of surprises!"

The girl looked round her quickly. The last thing that she wished to do was to be discovered in the locality, particularly by either Caryll or Wilson. Yet, if she were to keep her eyes on Daly, it was essential that she should get a clear view down the street.

The side-walk of the avenue is lined with trees, planted fairly closely and on both sides of it. Patricia suddenly realised that a slight détour would grant her the facilities which she sought.

She retraced her steps for a few yards, crossed the side-walk, and advanced again; this time far enough to give her a clear view right down the Rue Picot, without running much risk of detection herself. She took a position close to one of the trees, and found herself more or less immune from sight from the little group standing on the pavement.

She caught sight of John Daly at once. He was sauntering along slowly, as if bent only on taking the air and enjoying a quiet constitutional. But the presence of Caryll left very little doubt in the girl's mind that there lay the interest in the innocent walk.

"He came here to see something," said Patricia to herself. "Well, I'm going to see it too."

She looked at the group again, and something struck her now which she had not previously noticed. There was something a little peculiar, just out of the ordinary, about the men whom it included.

Patricia, from her point of vantage, examined them carefully, and she came to a very definite conclusion. Possibly the presence of Victor Caryll helped her to it. But she made up her mind that those around him were accustomed normally to wear some uniform. Instantly she realised what that uniform must be. These were police officers in plain clothes. And something had gone wrong.

Of that there could be little doubt. There was an

animation about the members of this group which bespoke excitement; there were frowns on the faces of one or two, and even the imperturbable Victor Caryll looked serious.

She looked at the house outside which they were standing. It was typical of that residential part of Paris; a tall house, possibly, even probably, made up of flats. As her eye ran up the outside, Patricia's interest suddenly flamed.

The face of a woman was looking out from a second-storey window. There was something a little furtive about the attitude; the face only was visible, and Patricia suddenly realised why. The woman had concealed herself fairly successfully by a judicious use of the window curtain.

But the face alone was sufficiently interesting to the watching girl. It was essentially a pretty face, even beautiful; and she could see that this woman, whoever she might be, was watching the group below with a very great interest.

Then there occurred a small but significant happening. Patricia had looked for a moment once more at the men on the pavement. She saw one of them suddenly look up at the house. Instantly Patricia's interest was centred on that watching face. She looked at the window at which she had seen it; it was no longer there.

Something seemed to have been decided by the men below, and they all entered the house. Patricia looked down the length of the street, to see John Daly turn and start to walk back very slowly towards her, still

to all prying eyes an unsuspicious pedestrian out for an afternoon stroll.

She realised that, were she to avoid discovery, she would soon have to move.

She waited for a few minutes, but nothing more seemed to be going to happen. Suddenly, however, something which riveted her attention did occur.

One of the men whom she had previously seen in the little group rushed out of the house and darted into the avenue. He passed quite close to her, but she did not move, not fearing recognition. She glanced up at the window where she had last seen the girl's face. She recognised the features of Bill Wilson looking out into the street.

A moment later a taxi passed her and stopped at the door of the house. The man whom she had just seen leave the house jumped out and re-entered it.

Patricia realised with a shock that in her interest in these events she had forgotten the approach of John Daly. She gathered from one quick glance in his direction that she could give herself about one minute more before she would have to leave. And in that minute there occurred the final scene.

Two of the men appeared suddenly at the door. They had a woman, closely veiled, with them. Her they bundled into the taxi, and entered it with her. The vehicle drove away.

Patricia moved then with great rapidity, and she was only just in time. She turned again, crossed the avenue, and, after waiting a moment or two, hailed

a taxi. She directed the driver to return to the Place Vendôme, but slowly.

The girl had timed this very carefully. She had given John Daly a sufficient interval in which to return to his car. As her taxi passed it on the other side of the avenue, she saw him getting into it.

Just for one moment she had a clear view of his face. John Daly was smiling broadly.

"Now, girl," said Patricia to herself, "don't be a dolt. Collect your wits. They're scattered. Why in heaven's name should he be pleased?"

CHAPTER XIII

"I WISH these darned fellows would hurry up," said Caryll rather irritably. "We've been here nearly half an hour already."

Wilson looked at his friend anxiously. It was seldom that Caryll allowed himself to be worried, but this evidently was one instance. And Wilson understood. In the presence of duty there are always certain things which hurt to do, and there could be little doubt that Vic was thinking at that moment not of the woman Anne Sinclair, as she was now, but of the girl Anne as both of them had known her in the past. To be responsible for the arrest of someone who has once been a valued friend can never be anything but an unpleasant sensation, and Wilson realised, almost with a shock, that his nerves also were on edge.

They were waiting at the corner of the Rue Picot, where it joins the avenue of the Bois de Boulogne. This was the meeting-place arranged by Dubonnet, but of his men there was as yet no sign. And as Vic had stated so emphatically, they had been already waiting for very nearly thirty minutes.

"I don't think Dubonnet was any too pleased with me," said Caryll lightly, that faint sign of irritation gone. "I failed, I rather imagine, to be sufficiently sympathetic about his troubles."

"He gave you a free hand," said Wilson shortly.

"I know. But he would like to curb it slightly. Do you imagine these are the chaps?"

Three men were approaching rapidly, making straight for the pair.

"Police officers, plain clothes, for the apprehension of criminals, three," murmured Caryll.

Wilson smiled. The description was unnecessary, because so obvious.

"I do not require my spectacles," he replied.

The leading man went straight up to Caryll.

"Monsieur Caryll?"

"Yes."

"Good-afternoon, monsieur. Will you take command?"

The man spoke in excellent English.

"Take command?"

"But yes, monsieur. Monsieur Dubonnet told us to place ourselves at your service for the arrest of a Madame Sinclair."

As they were talking, they had moved to the door of the building in which Anne Sinclair had her flat. Here they stopped.

"Well," said Caryll, "carry on. Arrest the lady."

"Pardon, monsieur. Monsieur Dubonnet's instructions were very definite." The speaker seemed a little ill at ease. "I was to do what you told me, monsieur. But you were to instruct me to arrest the lady in her presence."

Caryll looked at the man, a frown of annoyance on his forehead. Then suddenly his sense of humour saved the situation.

He turned to Wilson.

"I told you I was not popular, old fellow! I am to take all the responsibility, you may notice! Well, well, I've done it before."

He turned to the detective.

"I'll lead the way," he said, "but understand this quite definitely. The moment we get inside, the moment we see the lady, take her off at once. I will take full responsibility. We don't want any unnecessary delay. Is that quite clear?"

"Yes, monsieur."

Caryll looked at the other two.

"These are your subordinates?" he asked.

"Yes, monsieur."

"Right. They can act as escort. You yourself will remain with us and examine the flat."

The man nodded.

Caryll led the way into the house and up the stairs. He tried the door of Anne Sinclair's flat, but, not unexpectedly, found it locked. He rang the bell.

Footsteps could be heard approaching almost at once. The handle turned and the door was opened.

Caryll's sensations during that minute or two of suspense were very mingled. He did not quite know what to expect; the fallen woman who had shown herself to Bill Wilson on the previous day, or the Anne, whom he had known himself two years before, the butterfly of society.

But if he was just a trifle anxious, Bill Wilson was really nervous. Less than twenty-four hours previously he had called, more or less in a friendly way, on this

woman whom he had once loved and whom he was now about to see taken off and put under lock and key. The situation, as far as he was concerned, he realised to be almost unique, but this reflection gave him no pleasure nor comfort, excepting from the charitable point of view that few, if any, others would be called upon to face such unpleasant sensations.

Anne herself opened the door.

She was radiant. A wonderful fur coat hung loosely from her shoulders, concealing only partially a very smart afternoon frock made of dark green silk. A small hat of the same colour sat jauntily on her head.

She smiled.

"Come along in, Vic. And Bill too! How splendid! Please bring your friends. This is a great pleasure, Vic. It's a long time since I've seen you."

She was making it very difficult, but Victor Caryll was equal to the situation.

"Good-afternoon, Anne. I'm afraid you've made a small mistake. We are not here to call; we are here in the name of the French Government, and I must arrest you for complicity in certain unlawful practices which will be told you later. Will you kindly accompany these gentlemen?"

Anne laughed. It was no pleasant sound, rather a forced and mirthless effort. But her expression did not change one whit.

"Is this the work of Derek Sinclair?"

"What!"

It was Wilson who had let the exclamation escape him. Caryll looked at him sharply; then he turned once

more to the girl standing still with one hand on the handle of the door.

"I'm very sorry," he said soberly, "but I cannot discuss anything with you here. If you will . . . Ah!"

His hand shot out and grasped Anne's wrist in a vice-like grip.

"Open your hand," he said.

Something rather gentle had come into his voice. His quick eyes had noticed the glance which the girl had thrown towards that hand of hers still behind the door. He had intercepted in its infancy the movement of her arm; now, an infinite compassion in his eyes, he yet commanded instant obedience to his wishes.

The girl opened her hand. Lying in the palm, a small white tablet was immediately discernible.

"You will have that analysed when you return to your office."

But there seemed, at least to Wilson, little necessity for this instruction. Anne had now broken down completely; she presented a pitiful spectacle, sobbing passionately as if her heart would break.

The sight was too much for Bill Wilson. He took a quick step forward and supported the girl with his arm; Caryll turned and gave the Frenchmen behind him their final instructions. One of these immediately left to get a taxi; he was not gone more than a minute or two, and Anne, a veil thrown across her face to keep her misery from prying eyes, was removed in the cab with all speed.

Caryll turned to his friend.

"Sinclair has evidently deserted her," he said grimly.

"That constitutes yet another issue between him and me."

"Don't leave me out," said Wilson shortly. "If ever I lay my hands on that swine I'll wring his blasted neck."

The French detective, rather mystified, followed the pair into the flat.

Caryll made a thorough and systematic search of the flat, and one thing became obvious at once, since the first room which they examined was that of Anne herself. On the previous day Wilson had evidently seen Anne as she really was. In the hanging cupboard one evening dress of jaded if dazzling richness was discovered. That, and the clothes in which they had arrested her, seemed to constitute all Anne's wardrobe. There were other clothes, certainly, but these were evidently of great age and were very shabby; it was obvious that in point of fact Anne had but one dress in which she could appear at all decently dressed.

The whole affair was sordid in the extreme. Both Caryll and Wilson, in spite of the plain necessity for their actions, felt somehow that they were trespassing, here in Anne's room. Every discovery only made the pitiful story the more obvious.

It was clear that Anne was living in the greatest poverty. In the kitchen there were found a little flour, half a loaf of stale black bread, and a few mangy-looking vegetables. Everywhere the place was dirty, and there were manifold signs that rats found the flat a happy playground.

Everywhere, that is, save in one room, and this that

to which Anne had taken Wilson on the previous day. Here, at least, the place was clean. The furniture was good, if some of it was broken. The carpet was in good taste, but very worn. The two photographs that Wilson had noticed remained where he had seen them.

It was but too evident that Derek Sinclair, if he were in Paris—a question which was no longer a question in Victor Caryll's mind—had left his wife, left her cruelly in the lurch. Wilson, and Caryll too, could visualise the sad tale. The poor girl, struggling to keep alive, waiting week after week, month after month, for her husband to return to her or send for her, had suddenly found him out. How, remained a mystery.

But the shock of the discovery had been more than she could bear. She who had sacrificed everything to remain faithful to him in spite of the fact that the man was wanted by the police for forgery and murder, she had suddenly found the bottom knocked out of her life at one fell swoop, leaving her with but the hulk of her former self. From this frail sustenance she had been unable to find the strength to face the world.

Evidently, then, she had fallen back on the last desperate way out of her troubles. But she had wished to be found as she could be, should have been but for her husband. She had dressed herself up in her only decent clothing, and probably had been just about to take her life when Caryll had arrived.

These were his deductions; and in point of fact they were self-evident. But before leaving it the three men made a rapid and thorough survey of the whole flat.

Then, closing every window and locking the front door behind them, they descended the stairs and regained the street.

"I think at once to the Sûreté," said Caryll. "We want to get Anne out of this as soon as possible. We've drawn a blank, old bird, I'm afraid."

"I'm glad we came," said Wilson.

"So am I. Another few minutes, and . . . well, don't let's talk of it. Poor Anne!"

They were very silent as they returned to the Sûreté. Both were busy with their thoughts, Caryll putting the finishing touches to his mental picture of the whole affair, Wilson filled every moment more with a violent desire to make the man responsible pay for his perfidy towards this woman for whom, although he no longer loved her, he yet still retained a very great interest and regard.

They found Dubonnet in his office. He listened attentively to Caryll as he told of what had happened.

"Did you have that tablet analysed?" asked Wilson, when his friend had finished.

"Yes."

Dubonnet picked up a slip of paper and passed it to him.

"Cyanide of potassium," he said shortly. "A very quick death, monsieur."

There was a pause.

"I have sent the lady to the hospital attached to the prison," Dubonnet suddenly said. "There is no point in freeing her; moreover, she is really not fit to be free. There is, as a matter of fact, a very good reason

to keep her with us. She has made a statement."

"A statement?"

It was Caryll who asked the question.

"Yes."

Dubonnet smiled. He was evidently quite himself again, in high good humour, and no longer the rather huffy little man who had left them at the restaurant.

"You no doubt think, Monsieur Caryll, that your raid on the flat has been quite useless. Let me assure you that is not so."

Caryll smiled.

"I certainly thought so from the professional point of view. But looking at it from a different angle, I think . . . I'm glad. I rather feel that we were just in time to save the lady's life."

"Yes," Dubonnet was serious for a moment, "she has admitted that. But she has said something else of great, great interest. There is no more useful ally against a man, my friends, than a woman whose love has been spurned."

He stopped, to let the effect of his words penetrate. The little man was evidently enjoying himself hugely, and making the most of his opportunity.

"You see, she still thinks, following a line of reasoning which I cannot follow with her as yet, that her husband is responsible for her arrest. Her love for him has now changed to a burning, passionate hatred. She has told me that she knows where he is to be found, and that she will lead us to him and deliver him into our hands. You may have found nothing in that flat, but in bringing the woman here we may have taken

the one definite step which will bring us victory."

The little man had risen to his feet as he was speaking, and as he finished his little speech his voice rose with it. He was obviously intensely excited, and it was then, perhaps for the first time, that Caryll fully appreciated how much the solution of the mystery meant to him.

But the idea of Anne turning on her husband he found difficult to swallow. Yet, the more he thought of it, the more he realised the awful privations which Anne must have been through in the past two years, and the effect which proof of his infidelity—even slender proof such as she imagined she possessed—would have on her on top of it all. There remained also the great possibility that the strain had been too much, and that, even though only temporarily, Anne was no longer completely in control of all her actions, but was obsessed only by a great lust for revenge.

"If you are agreeable, Monsieur Caryll," went on Dubonnet suavely, "I propose to test the lady's words to-night. She has mentioned an address to me; she has also expressed her willingness to come with us and show us the secret way in. This is important, for there is no necessity to lose more men than we can help, and I think we may expect a fight. We may find things of interest; I sincerely hope we may find the two girls who are missing. It will be a great coup!"

Suddenly his eyes lit up once more.

"Oh, if only we can do it!"

There was a wealth of longing in his voice. Caryll smiled.

"Never you doubt it, old top; if not to-night, then some other night!"

He laughed. Then, abruptly, his tone changed.

"I've sworn I'll get him, and, by God, I will!"

Details were then arranged. Finally it was decided that a car would call for the two Englishmen at their hotel shortly after nine that evening and bring them to the Sûreté, whence the expedition would start.

Caryll and Wilson made their way back to the hotel on foot. They were strangely silent during the time which it took them to cover the distance; even Caryll, usually loquacious, was fully occupied with his own thoughts.

They arrived at last, and sat down in the lounge. A page-boy approached almost at once.

"Pardon, monsieur."

He proffered a silver tray to Victor Caryll. A pale green envelope lay on it, unstamped.

Caryll never moved.

"Who brought this?"

The boy shook his head and smiled.

"No speak English."

With an exclamation of annoyance Caryll jumped up and walked rapidly over to the hotel office.

"Who brought this?" he demanded.

"A gentleman, monsieur. He asked for you, and left that letter when he was told you were out."

"What did he look like?"

"Quite young, monsieur. Smart. Not quite so tall as you, monsieur. He was English."

"English? Are you sure?"

"Absolutely, monsieur."

There was nothing further to be gained by questioning. Caryll returned to his seat, opened the envelope, and read the contents. Wilson got up and looked over his shoulder.

"Dear Vic," ran the note, *"I understand you know who I am, so we'll not keep up any more pretences. I am only writing this to thank you ever so much for removing Anne. She was becoming a positive nuisance. Hasn't she gone off in looks?*

"Looking forward to seeing you again.

"Yours ever,

"DEREK."

Caryll crumpled the note in his hand. Then, abruptly, he signalled to a waiter.

"By heaven, what a swine!" he murmured, and his voice was not without venom. "All right, just you wait, my friend. When I do get you I'll pitch it strong and straight."

He turned to Wilson.

"Something is essential to remove the bad taste which is at present polluting the palate," he remarked. "Shall we indulge in a small pale ale?"

CHAPTER XIV

PATRICIA had scarcely regained the private sitting-room at the Ritz when John Daly made his appearance. But he found the girl comfortably ensconced in the largest armchair, her slim ankles resting on another chair placed sideways towards her, idly turning the pages of some society weekly. Just for one moment he stopped at the door and looked at her; she had evidently not heard him enter, and she presented a picture which, accustomed as he was to the sight of her frail beauty every day, nevertheless appealed to him just as much as it would have to any stranger.

Daly found his sensations difficult to diagnose. Here was he, standing in evident and frank admiration, taking in the attraction of those little feet and slender ankles, perfectly shaped figure, and truly adorable features. Yet, as a result of what he might have to say to the Council that evening, this girl would possibly be in some danger. There was little doubt that she had served her purpose, the purpose for which he had adopted her.

His was an important voice at the Council meetings —that, of course, he knew. But others also—one other in particular—was equally powerful. And if the vote should go against her . . .

Daly shook himself metaphorically. Best not think of such an unpleasant eventuality, he decided. He could try to save her, would try to save her. But he could not go too far, or risk alienating such powerful friends. Things might go hardly with him. He remembered the case of one who had tried, and the thought still made him shudder, hardened though he was.

Just for one second his admiration for her beauty pierced his normal covering shield of pure self-centredness. Just for half a second he cursed himself for having forgotten to warn her never to mention the green signet ring. Then, abruptly, that better feeling was gone, never to return. A mistake had been made, a bad mistake. The blame, whether rightly or wrongly, must be borne by this girl, the pawn. No whisper of suspicion that he himself had failed to foresee even one eventuality must ever be allowed even to be as much as conceived in the minds of those others.

"Been back long?"

His voice was as suave as usual.

Patricia looked round.

"Hullo, Dad!" She smiled to him. "No, only a few minutes. Had a nice drive?"

"Surely. A very nice drive. The air has done me good."

The man came and sat beside her.

"Did you go to the Bois?"

Patricia watched him carefully as she put the question. Lying back, her head resting on a cushion and her eyes half closed, she gave the impression, however, that she was merely making conversation.

"I did. It was a little cold out there, though, so I came back a bit before I planned to. Pat, I'm sorry, but I've got a disappointment for you."

The girl sat up and said nothing.

"I'm terribly sorry, my dear. But I can't take you out to the show to-night. I received a message just now, when I returned, that I am required this evening on business. I shall just have a quick dinner here early and then I shall have to go to a meeting. It is most important, and I'm sorry of course to disappoint you, but I can't help it."

"Business?"

"Yes, business."

There was a silence during which the girl watched Daly, something of scorn in her eyes. The man felt uncomfortable, felt awkward. He suddenly realised that, perhaps, it might not be such a bad thing after all if she were to be—disposed of. Daly was forced to confess to himself that he did not understand this girl, never had done so. She retained the power she had always possessed to make him feel ill at ease.

As was usual in such circumstances, he became aggressive.

"Yes, business," he repeated, rather truculently.

"Sure?"

There was something rather icy in her voice. Then she made her meaning abundantly clear.

"I know which side of my bread is buttered."

"I'm glad of that."

The man got up and moved over to the window. He remained looking out on to the Place Vendôme with his back to the girl.

Patricia watched him, a faint smile playing about her eyes and lips. She had succeeded in upsetting him, and that, curiously enough, seemed to give her some malicious pleasure. She wondered what was passing through his mind.

But, lying back on the cushions, she gave the impression only of a wayward child who has been promised a party and is at the very last moment suddenly deprived of it. There was a prettily assumed suggestion of petulance in her expression, a hint of intractability which in no wise detracted from her loveliness.

Actually she was not sorry that the promised evening was not to take place. Her expedition of the afternoon had provided her with very serious food for thought. A quiet dinner by herself would give her just the leisure she required in order to review the situation as it now stood, particularly in relation to her own position.

Daly turned and resumed his seat once more. He had evidently thrown off all traces of annoyance. He smiled on Patricia.

"You shall arrange some other evening, later in the week. We will have our little party, never fear!"

She smiled.

"Can we really have a party?"

"Why, certainly."

"Can I ask two friends?"

"Surely."

"Well, let's ask Victor Caryll and his friend, Mr. Wilson. I liked them awfully."

John Daly started. But his discomfiture, if any there were, was momentary. To the watching girl, he

appeared not to have shown any sign excepting just the faintest hesitation, which his next words might well have justified.

"You have only met them once, and I never at all."

His voice held just a suggestion of doubt, cleverly assumed.

"But that doesn't matter." She smiled to him. "After all, we're sure to meet them in the course of . . . business. My disappearance, after all, is not yet forgotten. And the last letter has renewed the police interest in me."

"Yes."

His voice still carried indecision.

Suddenly she changed her tactics.

"Oh, I do wish business wasn't so mysterious!" she cried abruptly. "First I am kidnapped, and am only saved at the cost, to you, of a large sum of money. Then somehow you find that this unlikely incident may be put to good use. You make me go to this man Caryll and tell him a go-by story which practically isn't true. You forge a letter to make it appear a fact—all in the name of business! Why?"

John Daly shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"My dear . . ."

He got no further. Patricia interrupted him savagely.

"Oh, don't put me off again! How did you get the green notepaper of exactly the right shade?"

The man laughed.

"There are many stationers in Paris, Pat."

"But who copied the writing?"

"I did." Daly laughed again. "I have always had that gift, my dear. Had I chosen a dishonest life, I could have made a fortune by the use of it."

"A dishonest life? That's funny. Here you are making me go and tell lies . . ."

"And who are you to squeal?"

The voice was harsh. Daly was aroused. His face, slightly flushed, he had thrust out in an aggressive attitude; a frown furrowed his forehead.

Involuntarily, Patricia recoiled against her cushions. There was something indescribably ferocious in his expression. His eyes were shining, the pupils contracted into little black spots, and seemed to be boring into her brain.

"Who are you to squeal? Where were you a year ago?" His voice was very low, but each word reached her perfectly distinctly, grated into her consciousness. "In the dock, eh? Set up for all to see! A common, tawdry, petty thief, eh?"

Suddenly, almost violently, his hand shot out and seized her wrist. Patricia, for the life of her, could not restrain a cry.

For a moment longer John Daly stared into her terrified eyes. Then, equally abruptly, he let her hand drop. An angry red mark showed at once on the delicate skin where his rough fingers had gripped into the flesh.

He laughed—a low, grating, mirthless sound.

Patricia bit her lip. She was determined that she was not going to weep, although the inclination was strong upon her. She had been badly frightened by his sudden

violence, so new, so unexpected; and it was this far more than any physical pain which she had suffered which brought her to the brink of tears. She faced him bravely.

He laughed again, leant back in his chair, took out a cigarette and lit it.

"It is far better," he said coldly, "to refrain from criticising and interfering with things you do not comprehend. You cannot be expected to understand all the ramifications of a big business; that takes years of a very special training. Without this knowledge, however, in certain things you can still be useful. To explain to you exactly how you were being useful to me I should find tedious. Yet I think you owe me just that little thing, an unquestioning obedience."

He looked at her. Somehow she seemed a little cowed. The thought of this power over her intoxicated the man. He looked at her in a way he had never previously thought of her. He looked at her slim ankles, at what was visible of the slender, silk-stockinged legs, at her attractive figure shown off to perfection both by her position in the huge armchair and the emotion she had just been through, and finally his eyes came to rest on her delicate features.

"I took you from the gutter," he said thickly, "and by God! you'll go back to the gutter if you cross me now. Understand?"

This was a direct threat. John Daly was temporarily unbalanced. The feel of her small wrist, powerless in his brutal grasp, had made him drunk with physical power. She, that beautiful frail creature lying there

cowed, not a yard from him, he could bend to suit his slightest whim. The thought pleased him beyond measure. Here was a slave, and a glorious slave at that! His to do with as he willed! Daly's mind suddenly became obsessed with this sense of power.

He leant over, seized her wrist again. This time he crushed it mercilessly in his strong fingers, savagely taking pleasure in the girl's agony. He felt a sort of barbaric pleasure in feeling the muscles crumpling against the bone. Patricia screamed.

It was more of a sigh than a scream, but it frightened the man just for a moment. He ceased to crush her wrist, but yet retained his hold on it.

"You'd make a fuss, would you?"

It was more of a threat than a question. John Daly was again looking into her eyes. Patricia saw in them something which frightened her far more than any physical pain.

He had taken on a brutish look. He leant over suddenly, pulled her towards him. Both movements were simultaneous and abrupt, and she was totally unprepared. She found her lips bruised against his.

Patricia thought that she would faint. A feeling of physical nausea almost overcame her in that forced and bestial kiss. She hit out with all her force with her free hand.

Daly released her suddenly. She fell back on to the cushions, to spring up as soon as she was able. She stood in front of him, bosom heaving, her hands clenched at her side, her eyes shining.

"You . . . cur."

She spoke the words scarcely above a whisper. But reflected in the voice there was a wealth of hatred, of loathing.

She suddenly realised that Daly appeared confused. All the colour had left his face; he sat staring at her. Quite motionless, almost a haggard look upon his countenance. Suddenly, with an effort, he rose to his feet.

"My dear, I'm . . . I'm terribly sorry. I was mad. But you made me mad, you know. I warned you! You must not ask questions."

Patricia looked at him coldly. But her brain was working at a furious speed. Some use might be made of the incident later, but for the moment there was nothing to be done. She could not walk out and leave him, some three thousand miles from her own country and practically penniless.

"This must not occur again, ever. Remember, according to law I'm your . . . daughter."

He took her hand, gently this time, and kissed the bruised skin showing in an angry red circle.

Somehow the action touched her.

"Let's forget about it," she said quickly. "I . . . I did exasperate you, I know. I won't be so foolish again."

He looked up at her.

"That certainly is generous," he said quietly. "You'd better have your dinner up here, my dear. I'll take a quick snack downstairs and go on to my meeting. To-morrow we shall go down to Cartier's. No doubt you fancy some little thing . . ."

Patricia smiled.

CHAPTER XV

AS soon as she was alone, Patricia moved to the mirror over the mantelpiece. This was almost an automatic action, and essentially feminine. She looked at her reflection in the glass, noted the ravages inflicted on her by the recent scene in which she had figured so prominently, and set to work to repair the damage. This she accomplished in a very short time; a deft touch here and there soon set her hair as she liked it, and the judicious application of a lip-stick and a little powder restored her face to its normal charming appearance. Then, feeling ever so much better, she rang the bell and returned to her armchair.

A waiter soon appeared. She ordered a cocktail, and announced that she would be ready for her dinner in half an hour. She had been glad enough to fall in with Daly's suggestion to have her evening meal in private in the room adjoining. She took out a cigarette and lit it, and was surprised to notice that her hand was shaking. Evidently the brutal treatment to which she had been subjected had affected her more deeply than she had imagined.

The cocktail was brought to her, and placed at a small table by her side. The waiter withdrew. Idly she lifted the glass to her lips and took a sip from it.

Patricia faced the situation bravely. A new element,

a new predicament had arisen, which required to be very carefully considered.

Up to the scene of that evening never had any question of sex entered into her relationship with this man John Daly. She had been with him one year only, but she had been alone with him, living under the same roof, first in America and then in Europe. And never once had she seen that look in his eyes which had so terrified her less than an hour before.

That John Daly had not adopted her merely out of charity or because he was lonely and she had appealed to him, she was certain. This had, actually, been her first impression, but first impressions are notoriously untrustworthy. Very soon she had begun to realise that she could be of use to him in his dealings, and that actually that was to be her rôle in the strange household. Right from the beginning, too, it had been impressed upon her that she must give implicit obedience, and never ask the why or wherefore. In return, she was treated generously, almost magnificently. She could buy what clothes she liked, and spend what she liked on them. At home, in New York, she had had her own runabout, an expensive car richly upholstered. She was constantly being given presents of jewellery, almost of whatever she might most desire at the time. She could have no complaints.

But . . . this was different. Patricia had never really grown fond of her father by adoption. Some things—his coarseness, his evident lack of any scruples—she actively disliked. Of one thing, his intense suavity, she was afraid. But now, when this suavity had

suddenly broken down, showing up the coarse bestiality to which it served as a mask, she realised; and, realising, feared all the more.

Patricia was quite clear in her own mind that, no matter how softly her nest were lined, this new attitude of Daly's she would not stand at any price. She was not very proud of her past, had long since hoped and tried to forget it. Hers had been only a petty theft, she knew; and in extenuation she could plead that she had done it only out of sheer necessity for food. But although the papers at the time had commented on the millionaire's great generosity and her own good fortune, she herself was better able than even they to judge.

Quietly resting in the armchair and sipping her cocktail, she reviewed the events of her life in that past year. First and foremost came the recollection of her life of ease, symbolised at that very moment by the armchair and the cocktail, to which she had previously been so unaccustomed, but than which she now felt that she could know no other life; and, secondly, she realised what was expected of her in return.

She sat up suddenly. Somehow, that incident, that moment when she had seen through the urbane John Daly, still so fresh in her memory—that moment seemed to have opened her eyes. Now she was seeing new significances, now she had a new suspicion amounting to almost a certainty.

She lay back again on the soft cushions.

"My! What a fool you've been, my girl! What a rock-bottom chump!"

She said the words softly, and the sound of her own voice gave her comfort.

She had spent those last twelve months on trial. She was sure of that now. On trial for what? She determined to find out if she could.

She had carefully been chosen from many others. Good looks, a presentable figure, perhaps these were important? A lack of conscience was obviously an essential.

She smiled. That puny theft, her first offence, had evidently been an asset rather than a deficit. Quietly, yet quickly, rather excited now, she set to work to review that year spent with John Daly, but now from a very different viewpoint.

She was trying to perceive stages in her progress along the lines which John Daly had evidently prepared and required her to travel. These, now that she was looking for them, instantly leapt to her mind.

There had been her first commission; in itself, a silly little thing; merely the telling of an unimportant lie at the man's direction. She had not hesitated, seeing no harm to come from it. Thence by stages she came to the darker falsehoods.

Early she had realised that Daly's wealth was not entirely due to business—business, at least, as she understood the word. She had mentioned this to Daly, but he had smiled. She remembered his answer vividly:

"If I am sharp," he had said, "so are others. It is necessary, in order to make money, to be sharper than the normal."

This had satisfied her. It was, however, very significant now.

Then she had been brought to Europe; first to London, where nothing very much had happened; then to Paris.

There within four days she had been kidnapped. The thought of her experiences rather frightened her even now. She had not been ill-treated. All that she had said on her release had been quite true: all except one thing, withheld at the direction of John Daly. She had made no mention of any man she had seen.

She remembered, again most vividly, John Daly's remark when the police had left:

"They'll never get them. If only this had happened in New York or London! Then the curs would have been rounded up in less than no time. But, by God, I'll chase them! I'll get them! No man can take over fifty thousand bucks from John B. Daly and get away with it!"

Then had come the command to visit Victor Caryll. Again the story she had told had been, in a sense, true. But this time much more garbled.

She had told of the man she had seen and as she had seen him. But the letter she knew to be a forgery; and its contents contained no vestige of the truth. All the story of blackmail, of a lover in America, was pure, unadulterated fiction, emanating from the fertile imagination of this man who gave her such a luxurious home.

Had the matter stopped there she would have been curious, but that would have been all. Then, however,

had come her casual remark about the green jade signet ring. And from that moment things had gone wrong.

Patricia racked her brain to discover in what way. She failed to understand. Even from this new angle, her new standpoint with regard to the whole affair, this remained as mystifying as ever.

Patricia got up impatiently. She looked at her bracelet watch, only to discover that it had stopped. She felt hungry and a little annoyed. She took a step forward towards the mantelpiece, to set her watch correctly by the electric clock thereon, supplied by the hotel.

She stepped on something.

Why it should have done so she could not understand, but the fact startled her. Perhaps it was that the room, indeed all the rooms of the great hotel, were thickly carpeted and everywhere soft to the tread. Perhaps it was that the sudden revelation to her of the more sinister side of this her life of the moment had affected her nerves more than she was prepared to confess. Yet there remained, whatever the reason, the indisputable circumstance that she experienced a sensation almost of foreboding, a sensation very much akin to a prescience that something of very great importance was about to occur.

She looked down, moving her foot. One only of the electric lights in the room had been lighted, and the light was none too bright. At first she could see nothing at all against the dark background of the thick carpet. She stooped, and allowed the tips of the fin-

gers of her right hand lightly to run over the soft material. She felt the contact of something hard and cold.

She jerked her hand away. Then, suddenly, she laughed; but very gently, more to herself than aloud.

"Say, what in heaven's the matter with this girl?" she murmured the words. "You're plumb crazy, Patricia. What are you afraid of? Mice?"

The habit which she had long since formed of chiding herself gently when in moments of excitement stood her in good stead. She was herself again on the instant. Quickly she stooped, and her fingers closed on the small object, which, now that she had placed its position, she could just locate with her eyes.

It was a small ring, to which three keys were attached. To her knowledge she had never seen it before. She moved over to the light, the better to examine her find.

The ring was of some metal—probably of steel, she judged; but it was painted black. One of the keys was a small ordinary key also painted black, but the other two were of the type which is known as the Yale.

A sound came to her ears. She heard the outer door of the suite, the door to the dining-room, open and close noisily.

Acting purely on an impulse which she could not at that moment have explained, even to herself, Patricia hurriedly thrust the keys into the front of her dress. She laughed to herself as she did so, thinking of some tag which she had heard about a very similar use for a key in the case of a person fainting. Never

had Patricia felt less like fainting in her life. She was now once more completely mistress of herself. But, this she could not deny, she was strangely excited.

John Daly, wearing his overcoat and with his hat in his hand, came in abruptly. He looked at the girl standing by the fireplace, serenely watching him.

"Have you seen a bunch of keys? A small bunch?"

She looked at him narrowly.

"A bunch of keys?"

"Yes. The ring is black. There are three keys, two Yale and one ordinary. I've lost them somewhere."

Her question had served its purpose. She had put it merely to gain time, to think. Abruptly she made up her mind.

"No."

"It's damned annoying. However, it's not terribly important . . . now."

He paused, a slight flush on his face. Then he went on quickly.

"I'll tell them at the office that they must look out for them."

"What on earth," asked the girl of herself, "did he say that he didn't mean to say? What on earth did he try to cover up?"

But out loud she said nothing.

John Daly came forward and took her hand, a smile on his face.

"My dear, you have forgiven me?"

His smile seemed to her a vicious leer. The suavity, self-confidence, which radiated from his voice made

her somehow feel a little sick. She disengaged her hand abruptly.

"Forgiven, yes. But not forgotten. These things take time."

Somehow she couldn't bring herself to call him by the usual "Dad." He was still peering into her face; and, perhaps from her imagination, there again came to her just a hint of the brutish look in his eyes. She shuddered involuntarily.

John Daly laughed. It sounded a little forced, as if he were trying to appear unconcerned. She watched him closely, particularly watched the expression in his eyes. But from this she gleaned nothing; if that sensuous light had really come again, then it had gone on the instant.

"A pretty girl is born to be kissed," he laughed again, this time evenly. "Who said that? If no one did, then I do. And they say a little present often blots out a displeasing memory. A sweet makes one forget the taste of the medicine. To-morrow morning, my child, to-morrow morning at Cartier's. Don't forget that."

He paused and looked at the girl. His eyes travelled slowly from her features to her perfectly formed neck. John Daly decided on the spot that she was infinitely desirable from every point of view.

Patricia had seen that glance. A smile, which had been given birth by the mention of Cartier and the morrow, was suddenly frozen from her lips.

Daly met her look.

"I must go," he said. "I'm afraid I may be late as it is. When the waiter brings you your dinner, you might

please tell him of the keys. Ask him to tell the chambermaid. Then she can look when dusting in the morning. And if you find them, dear, put them on my dressing-table, will you?"

He smiled cheerily and blew her a kiss; then, turning on his heel, he left the room as hurriedly as he had entered.

Patricia waited until she heard the closing of the outer door. Then, a faint smile on her lips, she moved over to the windows. Outside in the dark the lights of the many cars rushing helter-skelter through the Place Vendôme provided a pretty spectacle.

But Patricia did not see it. She was thinking desperately, wondering why she had denied all knowledge of that bunch of keys. Then, so abruptly that it almost overwhelmed her, she saw the true reason shining out as clearly as the stars above her.

That one action, that loathsome kiss which John Daly had forced upon her when he had been mentally inebriated by the feeling of his own physical power over her, had alienated any affection which she might previously have felt for him. From an unquestioning servility, which entailed her willing help in his activities given in exchange for the life of luxury which he provided for her, he had turned her into an active foe.

Patricia turned and looked rather sadly at the richly furnished room in which she stood. She realised that all this would have to be surrendered; that soon, very soon even, she would have to fly from this man. It was a wrench. This life of ease had embedded itself into

her very soul. She was loath to give it up by any action of her own. But she had seen the look in his eyes as he had crushed her lips to his that afternoon; she had seen again, not ten minutes before, just the same look when he had faced her in the room before leaving her. She knew enough of men in general to realise that the flames of passion, if once aroused, are easily re-kindled, remaining in the intervals as a sort of smouldering fire. Finally she knew enough of John Daly in particular to realise that when he wanted something he usually got it; if not by fair means, then by foul.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the waiter.

"Mademoiselle est servie."

Patricia moved into the next room to her solitary meal. An evening paper, *L'Intransigeant,* lay at the side of her plate. She picked it up, looked at it idly, glad of this respite from her sombre thoughts. A flaring headline met her eyes.

Patricia could read French. She learnt, from the paragraph which had attracted her attention, that an important arrest had been made that afternoon, about which the police were strangely reticent. They had, however, vouchsafed the hint that their activities were beginning to bear fruit with regard to the mysterious disappearances of the three girls; only one of whom, the young American, had so far been recovered.

A cold shiver ran down the length of Patricia's slim body. She saw once more before her eyes a vision of the lascivious glare in the eyes of John Daly, she felt again the nauseating sensation of that extorted kiss. And with these memories came the sudden blinding

realisation of the danger in which she herself had been, of the peril which those two poor French girls still ran; a danger, thought Patricia, far worse than death.

Involuntarily she brushed her mouth with the back of her hand.

In that instant, as she afterwards was wont to say, she made up her mind once and for all. She decided on a step which was irrevocable.

She would go and see Victor Caryll, and to him she would tell the plain truth.

When? As soon as possible. As soon as she had finished her dinner.

Patricia's quick brain was working at express speed. She realised at once that with this decision her activities were not finishing, but only just beginning. Almost for certain Victor Caryll would require her to give no hint of the step which she had taken, but to carry on in the suite with Daly just as if nothing at all had happened. She would be able to tell him a good deal, to rouse his professional interest in the man at least. But much more might yet be gleaned.

Therefore no breath of suspicion must rest on her. Were she suddenly to leave her dinner and to rush out of the hotel, the waiter would probably inform Daly on his return. Were she to finish quietly and then go out, there would be no cause for suspicion. Anyway, for this she could certainly make some excuse.

"Patricia, my girl," said she to herself, "you're cooking your goose, you know. But you're surely saving your own soul."

With which remark she laughed suddenly, out loud,

much to the astonishment of the waiter. For she had abruptly plunged fish knife and fork into the delicacy on her plate before her, known throughout the world as *"Sole meunière."*

At about the same moment Victor Caryll and his friend Bill Wilson left their hotel in the car sent for them by Monsieur Dubonnet.

CHAPTER XVI

PATRICIA did not hurry unduly over her meal. She saw no reason for any frantic haste, and in point of fact she was now considering to what use it would be best to put the lost keys which were now in her possession. Snatching a moment when she was alone, during which the waiter had disappeared in order to fetch the next course, she quickly withdrew them from their hiding-place.

The two Yale keys came first to hand, and in these she could find no immediate interest. They were, in common with their kind, precisely similar to all other Yale keys which she had seen. But the little black ordinary key attracted her attention.

This, she felt, might be something special, might contain some hidden message of use to the police and Victor Caryll. She examined it carefully.

On the one side nothing of note was visible. She turned it over in her hand, and immediately her interest was riveted.

On the top of the key there were engraved the letters R.P.

She heard footsteps approaching, and rapidly returned her find to its hiding-place. The waiter reentered the room, bringing with him the savoury.

Patricia was particularly fond of savouries. But

this one she ate perfunctorily. Her mind was obsessed only by the dawning of a theory.

"R.P.? Where were you this afternoon, my girl? Somewhere off the Champs Élysées. Now, steady, Pat. What was the name of the street?"

The Rue Picot!

And with this recollection came something else. She saw again the man she now hated and feared—the man John Daly—standing before her in that sitting-room just through the door. What was it he had said?

"It doesn't matter . . . now."

Then he had become confused. Patricia swallowed the last mouthful of her savoury abruptly, nearly choking herself.

"You've got it, Pat!" she cried in high elation, but of course only to herself. "Whoever said you hadn't got brains? No one. Sure, but he'd have been a prize simp if he had!"

Here was corroboration. "It didn't matter very much . . . now." No, because the lady who owned that flat had that very afternoon suffered arrest. It is to be regretted, but it must be recorded, that Patricia so far forgot herself as to snigger.

Her thoughts were now travelling at such a pace that the girl felt that any moment they might run off the line. A new significance loomed up out of all this mystery.

"Café, m'selle?"

The waiter's voice brought her back to earth with a bump. She answered hurriedly:

"Oui. Dans l'autre chambre."

Abruptly she got up and moved into the sitting-room. There she returned to her armchair and lit a cigarette.

Her coffee was brought to her. The waiter retired.

Somehow, until he had done so, she dared not even think of all these things. She well knew all that she risked by running counter to John Daly. But Patricia realised suddenly that she was enjoying herself hugely. From merely a pawn in this game of mystery, she had abruptly risen of her own volition to the importance of a leading piece. This fact, the spice of it all, pleased her beyond measure.

Now, in the light of her new theory, she could understand a thing which had puzzled her intensely when she had seen it. She could understand the smile which she had seen that afternoon—the smile on the face of Daly as she had passed him in her taxi immediately after that woman from the house in the Rue Picot had been arrested.

He had the key of that house. Of that there could be little question, although it now snuggled in the folds of her silken underclothing. He had been pleased when he had seen the arrest taking place. He . . .

Patricia screwed up her lips and whistled.

Now she had got at the motive. Now, at long last, she was beginning to see a clear way up this avenue of strange happenings and abstruse facts.

Could it be that John Daly knew that unfortunate woman as his mistress? Could it be that he was tired of her now, glad to be rid of her?

It fitted. And it fitted with something else. If this

were so, then was it not perfectly possible that the man, grossly selfish and entirely sensual, was looking round already for a successor to that woman? And could it be that she was the chosen?

Patricia frowned. Her deductions were leading her in a direction which she emphatically did not like. But it fitted, it all fitted. John Daly might be feeling economical. He might be thinking of amalgamating the rôles of paramour and business pawn, whereas previously these two posts had been filled by different women.

Patricia frowned just as hard as she could. She didn't like the situation one little bit.

Then out of the fog of doubt and mystery there came to her mind the remembrance of Victor Caryll's face.

She had liked his face; she had liked his free and good-natured manner. She had felt, instinctively, that here was a man on whom she could always rely implicitly.

He should be told all, everything. He would be able to advise her as to what was best to do. He had called her Pat, had forced her, not unwillingly, to acknowledge him as a friend. Very well; she would make him pay for the privilege, and prove that friendship.

But, woman-like, Patricia decided to preen her feathers before the visit. There was plenty of time. The few minutes that would be occupied in changing could make little difference.

She got up suddenly, and noticed her coffee, cold now, at a little table beside the chair which she had just vacated, forgotten in the excitement of her

thoughts. She could risk nothing, felt that she wished to leave nothing to chance. She drained the tepid liquid and grimaced as she did so. Then she went rapidly to her room.

Here she donned an evening frock, her latest and newest, of black. She spent a moment or two in front of the mirror putting in its place a rebellious wisp of hair. She drew a silken cloak closely round her slender shoulders, and left the room.

She descended by the stairs to the lounge of the hotel, through which she passed quickly. She did not charter a taxi by means of the good offices of the commissionaire, who scarcely saw her, and she hoped would not recognise her. In this pious hope she was fairly confident, for instead of the elaborate removal of his gorgeous cap with which he normally favoured her as the daughter of a millionaire, the action was much more perfunctory, quite in accordance with his usual greeting to a stranger passing through his doors. She turned sharply to the left and made off along the pavement round the Place Vendôme. Nestling in her satin evening handbag was the bunch of keys.

She decided, since the night was a pleasant one and not too cold, to walk the short distance to the hotel at which Caryll was staying. This took her a very short time, since she moved briskly.

Arrived at the office in the lounge, she asked for Caryll. She was informed that he was not in. She asked, as the next best thing, for Wilson. The reception clerk regretted, but neither Monsieur Caryll nor Monsieur Wilson was in the hotel. They had left some time before.

Patricia frowned. This was distinctly a setback.

She thanked her informant, and once more returned to the street.

What to do?

"This certainly is a blow," said Patricia to herself. "Where on earth can they have got to?"

She thought of going to the Sûreté, but decided against this. To Victor Caryll, and to him alone, did she propose to tell her story. As she turned the situation over in her mind, she walked aimlessly along the street, back towards the Place Vendôme.

Abruptly Patricia realised that she was going to sneeze. She dived her hand into the bag and produced a small square of silk which she was wont to dignify with the title of handkerchief. This she applied to her nose, only to find that the inclination had gone.

She returned the handkerchief to the bag, and as she did so her fingers came into contact with the ring of keys. Afterwards, Patricia thanked her stars for that still-born sneeze.

The touch reminded her of her conclusions with regard to the woman she had seen arrested that afternoon and John Daly. An impulse came to her—a mad impulse, no doubt—to go and see the flat in the Rue Picot for herself, and thus prove whether the little black key were that of that flat or not.

Patricia liked impulses. When one came to her she was usually no sluggard in putting it into effect.

She hailed an importuning taxi.

"Drive me to the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne," she said.

The short distance from the avenue to the big build-

ing in the Rue Picot she felt that she would prefer to do on foot.

Patricia had time during that taxi ride to regret her impulse had she felt so inclined. But she regretted it not one jot. She was, in fact, thoroughly pleased with it. Here was the opportunity to prove whether her theorising had been so much waste of time or whether she had hit the nail truly on the head.

She paid off the taxi in the avenue, about a hundred yards before the turning which led into the Rue Picot. Then, having watched it drive off and be lost to sight, she walked quickly down the side-walk.

She decided that her movements would have to be quick and confident. She was almost certain to come across a *concierge* just inside the door, but she felt that if she walked past him rapidly he would imagine that she knew her business, and would not interfere with her. Having seen the arrested woman watching from a window on the second floor, she knew the precise position of the flat in which she was so interested.

She approached the house and unhesitatingly passed through the doors. As she had expected, a *concierge* was busying himself in the entrance hall. She paid not the slightest attention to him, but walked straight past him and up the stairs.

She had one very bad moment when he looked up at her a trifle curiously. She thought that he would speak, but, to her great relief, he allowed her to pass with no word of protest.

She reached the first landing and stopped. She allowed a sigh to escape from between her lips, a sigh which denoted the palliation of her fears.

"A burglar surely has some pluck!" said Patricia to herself. "To break into some house, even through the front door, depletes my bank balance of nerve!"

With which she continued her ascent.

She reached the second landing, and faced the door. Then from her bag she drew forth the little bunch of keys.

Her heart beating a little faster in her excitement, Patricia placed the little black key in the lock. It fitted. She found that it turned easily. A very gentle pressure was sufficient to open the door.

"Pat, my girl," said she to herself, "you've missed your job. You should have been in the deduction department of the New York police, instead of an exhibit in the court. Shall we enter?"

She remained for a moment undecided. The probabilities were that the flat was empty, but there might be a servant. Could she explain her presence if there was? The landing was dimly lighted, but through the crack made by the just-open door Patricia could see that the flat was in darkness.

The girl would probably have entered in any case, out of an impulse prompted by curiosity. But her mind was made up for her; suddenly she heard footsteps coming up the stairs behind her.

Patricia hesitated no longer. Silently she opened the door just sufficiently to allow her to pass noiselessly through, and quickly closed it behind her.

She found herself in complete darkness. She stood quite still and listened. No sound came to her ears from within, although she heard whoever it was who

was ascending the stairs pass on the other side of the door and continue the ascent up the next flight.

In her bag Patricia had a petrol-vapour cigarette lighter, one of John Daly's last presents. This she produced, replacing the keys at the same time.

For just one moment she hesitated to light it. Then, overcoming a feeling of slight nervousness, she let it flame.

She found she was in a sort of small entrance hall. This she examined quickly. There was nothing of interest in it, except a general impression of dirt and poverty. Patricia was surprised. That John Daly should have tolerated this squalor in the flat of his mistress struck her as peculiar.

There were three doors leading from this hall, two on the right and one on the left.

She made for the left-hand one. First extinguishing her light, she tried the handle. It opened very easily. She stood quite still, listening, before she ventured to set her lighter going again.

She was in the kitchen. Here the general appearance of the room confirmed her first impression. The place was untidy in the extreme, was everywhere filthy. This in itself did not surprise her quite so much, for it was a part of the flat to which Daly would not be likely to come; but all the same Patricia wondered why, with all his money, the man could not have supplied some decent servant for this his woman.

She returned to the hall, and tried next the door nearest the front hall of the flat. This she found to be a bedroom. Patricia did not examine it. She looked

only for a moment, and then closed the door behind her.

She turned towards the last remaining door of the hall.

She was struck motionless by what she saw. For one moment the girl thought she had gone mad, so certain was she that it had not been there for her to see less than one minute previously, when she had crossed the hall.

Patricia swayed, and then, by a monstrous effort, regained control of all her faculties.

There was someone in that room, someone who had not entered the flat as she had done, someone who must have been there all the time—there in darkness.

For suddenly, as she had looked at it, a light had lit up the crack between door and carpet.

The streak of light began to enlarge itself, began to extend rapidly up the dim outline of the door.

Patricia realised abruptly that if she stayed where she was, the person who was opening the door would inevitably see her in probably something a little under fifteen seconds.

CHAPTER XVII

PATRICIA acted on instinct. Long before the door had opened sufficiently to allow the man controlling it any view of the hall in the subdued light, she had moved as quickly and as silently as a cat to a position well in the corner, which would give her protection from view provided that the light in the hall was not lit. Her quick brain made her fairly confident that this would not happen, if the man were a crook, because of the possibility of the illumination being noticed from outside the flat. If, on the other hand, he were of the police, then, although explanations would certainly be required, there would only be those which she would have given to Victor Caryll in the ordinary course of events on the following morning.

Yet, despite these thoughts, which were in nature comforting, Patricia was in no way pleased with the situation. She realised that, were she pestered by some piece of bad luck, things would inevitably go ill with her; and to be protected from view only, and at that by only a mythical cloak made by the general obscurity, she found to be a nerve-racking business.

But the man had by now entered the room. Her interest in him temporarily overcame her fears. She was left with a feeling of apprehension tempered by a lively concern with his movements.

He switched on an electric torch.

"Hell!" said Patricia to herself, but feelingly.

His possession of that torch made her safety very much more remote.

"That puts me back quite a lot," she added.

She realised abruptly that if she were to avoid discovery now, she would have to be the favoured of my Lady Chance. However, she remained crouched in her corner, knowing well enough that her best plan lay in staying absolutely motionless.

The man walked straight over to the hall door, the front door of the flat. She noticed that he kept the rays of his torch playing down onto the carpet, and this was the first intimation that she had that the man was not a minion of the police. Evidently he was keenly desirous of avoiding any possibility of discovery from the outside.

Arrived at the door, he knelt down on the carpet. From the corner, Patricia could watch his every movement. She saw him draw up the corner of an old and decrepit-looking rug which adorned the entrance, and instantly there became visible a small switch key. This she recognised for what it was on the instant, because of its resemblance to the ordinary electric-light switches seen on the walls of the room.

This switch he operated. Apparently nothing happened.

Then he rose to his feet. He placed his hand on the door-handle and opened the door.

A voice, from that room in which she had not been and whence this man whom she was watching had just emerged, remarked: "All right."

Patricia jumped. So there were more than one!

Now she had no doubts at all as to the identity of these men. They manifestly had no business to be in the flat at all, a fact which was made abundantly clear by the conduct of the individual whom she had been watching. He had obviously just put in motion an arrangement which was designed to warn the men in the next room should anyone enter the flat, a warning which would not be realised by the person entering.

On hearing his confederate's voice, the man with the torch released the handle of the door and returned quickly to the lighted room. He swung the rays of light about as he did so, but in a half-hearted fashion. Evidently this was a mere formality; he was obviously quite confident that there was no one else present. Patricia did not mind the torch now; she was behind it.

The man entered the lighted room and closed the door behind him. She heard the key turn in the lock. She was once more in complete darkness.

She heaved a great sigh of relief. The immediate danger was over. It had been a trying minute or two, despite her interest in the man's movements, which had to a certain extent made her forget the peril of her position.

But she wasted no time on retrospective thoughts. Her brain was fully occupied in drawing what inferences she could from all that she had just seen.

In the first place, one thing stood out pre-eminently. The presence of the warning signal, all fitted out perfectly and ready for instant use, could mean but one thing: that the flat was used for some illicit purpose.

Secondly, the intimate knowledge of this signal displayed by the two men, one of whom she had just seen set it in motion, could mean only that they were part of the gang which was carrying on nefarious work.

But, thirdly, a woman had been arrested from that flat that very afternoon; and she knew from the evening paper that this woman had been apprehended for complicity with the mysterious kidnapper.

The full force of these deductions struck Patricia, still crouching in her corner, like a blow. Here she was actually in contact with the very men for whom Victor Caryll and the Paris Sûreté were searching with such diligence. She was in a position in which she might gain immensely valuable information for the man whose face she could see once more so vividly, who had made such an impression on her even in that one short meeting. And, better still, she might, by finding out just a little more and if possible the identity of the members of the gang—she might be the means of setting at liberty and returning to the safety of their homes those two unfortunate girls still at the mercy of their captors, still in dire peril. The thought thrilled her.

Patricia, absolutely soundlessly, stood upright once more and began to move towards the door. She had an idea that a glance through the keyhole might conceivably yield some results. As she moved, something jingled in her bag. Patricia stood stock-still, a cold fear in her heart.

But she was quickly reassured. No move was made from within that room. She could just hear the muffled

sound of voices, which continued without interruption.

She made up her mind rapidly. That *contretemps* must not be allowed to recur. She plunged her hand into the bag so to arrange its contents, that no other tell-tale noise should come from it.

Her fingers came in contact with the bunch of keys. And with the cold feeling of the metal there rose in her imagination a mental picture of John Daly. Patricia remained quite motionless, thinking—thinking desperately. A new theory, more than a theory, a thought which amounted to a certainty, came to her in one blinding flash and bade fair to overwhelm her. Patricia suddenly wanted a rock more than anything else in the world, a rock upon which to lean.

For she realised, and with such force that she wondered how on earth she could have missed the point for so long, that her previous theories on the possession of the key by John Daly might very well be wrong.

He had known the woman, that was certain, since he had the key to the flat. But whereas in nine cases out of ten the possession of the key of a woman's flat could mean but one thing, it seemed to Patricia that here she was probably up against the tenth case. That woman had been arrested because of the abductions, so much the police had admitted. Was it possible that Daly himself was mixed up with the gang?

Patricia suddenly started to move forward again. There would be plenty of time, later on, in which to consider all the facts as she knew them. For the moment the essential was action. There might be a lot

more which she could discover, and which she might miss were she to remain standing there motionless, thinking out and seeking explanations for all the conflicting happenings.

She cast resolutely from her mind all these theories, and approached the door. Patricia moved as silently as she could. She reached her goal, and knelt down on one knee. In this manner she lowered her eyes to the level of the keyhole, whilst retaining as much flexibility of movement as was practicable in the event of surprise.

Patricia had never looked through a keyhole before. Even in her school days she had scorned such a method of obtaining information, no matter how much she might have been curious or required it. But this was different; she had now quite definitely decided in her own mind on whose side she proposed to fight, and she well knew that her enemies, Vic's enemies, would not be scrupulous over their methods. Patricia felt perfectly justified in doing anything which could help her, knowing that the other side would not discriminate between fair and foul.

She looked through the keyhole.

Her first impression was one of astonishment. She had expected to be able to see only a very small portion of the lighted room on the other side of the door. Instead she found that, since the room was quite a large one, she could see most of the wall farthest from her.

In front of it there was a table, at which three men were sitting. Two of them were wearing green hoods

over their heads, with eyeholes cut in them to give their wearers a clear vision; these were made apparently of silk, but from her distance Patricia could not be sure. The third man, evidently the man she had already seen only a few minutes before, had no concealing hood, and was dressed in a lounge suit.

Patricia had realised on the instant that one of the two hooded men was almost certainly he by whom she had been interviewed during the short time when she herself had been kidnapped. The green hoods worn by both the men whom she was now watching were similar to each other in every detail, and precisely the same as the one she had already seen. The men, apart from their hoods, were dressed in the same style—in dinner-jackets.

Patricia, her excitement increasing with every moment, allowed her glance to wander to the hands of these two men. The first man wore no rings at all. The second, sitting at the head of the table, was wearing a large green signet ring.

The girl stared, fascinated, at it. This was the man who had talked to her before, when she had been his captive. That was the ring of which the mention to Caryll had caused John Daly to act in such a curious way, and to show such consternation.

Patricia pursed her lips in a still-born whistle.

"Paddy, my girl!" she said to herself, "that great lump, Victor Caryll, will thank you for this night's work!"

The men were talking. Remaining perfectly still, her eyes glued through the keyhole on the three men, Pa-

tricia tried to listen. But their voices were very muffled, and she could hear little except an isolated word or so, which she could not string together into any intelligible sentence.

It suddenly occurred to the kneeling girl that if she could see so clearly, it was more than likely that if she substituted an ear for an eye she might very well be able to hear the conversation. The thought did not please her, however. Without being able to watch their movements she loathed the idea of remaining behind that door, so near to men whom she knew would give her short shrift should they discover her spying on them. However, she realised that this was necessary were she to make the best use of such a golden opportunity.

"Very well. I'll do it," said Patricia to herself, more for the sake of encouragement than anything else. The girl had a habit of talking thus, encouraging herself, cursing herself, or laughing at or with herself, which may have been the result of the lonely life which she had led, but which she frequently found most useful.

On this occasion it undoubtedly helped her to do this thing, which did require a great effort of will. Still remaining in the same position, she moved her head, until she could feel the cold metal of the keyhole on her ear. At once the conversation being carried on in the other room, which had previously been quite incomprehensible, became audible and clear.

One of the men was in the middle of a sentence as the ear of the listening girl came into place:

". . . and as a result you had to be warned. I'm

sorry, but there you are. I don't think it was through any fault of mine."

There was a moment's pause.

"No," said another voice. "I am happy to be able to agree with you, happy because I should hate you to think me . . . harsh."

Again there was a pause. It was broken at length by the voice that had spoken last.

"How long after the event did you let me know?"

The question was answered with alacrity, almost as if the speaker was anxious to rehabilitate himself in his questioner's eyes.

"At once! I mean as soon as I myself knew, and probably a little over an hour after it occurred."

"It is most unfortunate."

The voice was suave, yet somehow there vibrated in the tone a metallic ring which struck the listening girl as being hard as steel. Patricia longed to look again, but she did not dare miss any of the spoken words. In any case, she already knew all that there was to be seen; the covering of green silk effectively concealed any trace of the features of this man—features which she felt she would so like to see and impress upon her memory.

Abruptly the apparent leader spoke again. She had little doubt that this cold and even voice belonged to the man who wore the signet ring, and she listened with all her might.

"They are late."

He was answered by a third voice, a voice she had not heard before, evidently the voice of the man she

had already seen, although indistinctly, as he had crossed the hall to set in motion the warning signal.

"It'll take them some time. She's got to get them into the passage safely, and then they've got to be overpowered by the gas and brought round again."

"Still, they have had nearly two hours."

"Well, they may be here any minute now."

The first voice, the voice of the man whom Patricia had first heard excusing himself, broke in:

"That was a darned good idea of yours, Sinclair."

"Yes." There was something of self-satisfaction coming through the veneer of suavity, or so Patricia thought as she listened. "I confess I am pleased with Schedule B."

"And particularly the use of this flat as a meeting-place, the very last room in Paris where the police would think of looking."

"Seeing that they have examined it and sealed it up as useless, you mean? That also pleased me."

"How do you get those great ideas, boss?"

It was the third voice which asked the somewhat flattering question.

But Patricia was no longer listening as intently as before. She heard their voices, heard the words spoken, but almost mechanically. Her thoughts had once more taken possession and run away with her.

It was the mention of that room which had started them off. She had forgotten temporarily that she had been amazed to see the slit of light made by the opening door, when her presence had so nearly been discovered, and thus find that she was not alone in the flat.

Of the fact that she had been, when first she had come in, she had no doubt; for such an efficient gang would never leave the fixing of the alarm signal one moment longer than was absolutely necessary after entering. And yet, if they had not been there in the first place, before she herself had entered, how on earth had they come in? How on earth had they been able to make their entry without either noticing her presence or giving away to her the fact that she was no longer alone?

With a start Patricia realised that she might be missing valuable information by allowing herself to become absorbed by these thoughts of hers. They could very well be left for later on. Upon one further idea did she allow herself to meditate, but only for a moment. What connection had John Daly with these men? That he was not there at the moment she felt fairly sure, because she had last seen him, just before he had left the Ritz that evening, dressed in an ordinary lounge suit. Only one man was dressed like that of the three inside, and him she had seen, since he was the one without the green hood. Both the others were dressed in an evening dinner-jacket suit. But that one in plain clothes was not in the least like Daly in face or figure.

"Anyway," she said to herself, "I should surely recognise his voice, even if he were hiding his face under a green hood."

But, just to make sure, and since the conversation of the three had ceased to interest her in the smallest degree, being merely a show of flattery on the part of

two of the men towards the third who was evidently the chief, she decided to have another look.

She applied her right eye to the keyhole again. The man in the lounge suit was out of it. The man with the signet ring was obviously too thin, and although it was difficult to tell, as he was sitting, he looked too tall as well. The third man might have been her father by adoption, but he was dressed in a dinner-jacket, and he was wearing no jewellery of any sort.

"Anyway, Pat," said she to herself, "you'd know his voice all right, wouldn't you?"

She had reiterated the question, just to convince herself. And she gave herself the same answer. The two voices, the one she had heard and the one she knew as that of John Daly, were very different.

Patricia was about to remove her eye from the keyhole, and substitute her ear in case anything more of interest might be spoken by one or other of these three men, when suddenly her attention was riveted on the table at which the men were sitting.

Before, she had been so interested in the men themselves that she had failed to notice the room in general or any of the furniture in particular. But now a small light had shone out from that portion of the table directly in front of the man who was wearing the signet ring; and as she looked, she saw for the first time that there were two small electric globes on a little stand in front of him. One of these was red, and the other green. It was the green one which, by suddenly becoming lit, had attracted her attention.

The man with the signet ring touched the man next

to him, the man in plain clothes, and pointed to the light.

Patricia happened to glance at the fellow's face. She saw, with a start, that he was smiling. His lips moved, and although she could not hear the words, she knew what it was he had said as well as if her ear had been glued to the keyhole. In her imagination she could almost hear the words pronounced, so clearly could she read his lips:

"'They have come!"

Patricia felt a dry feeling in her throat, a singing in her ears. She wanted to scream, but no sound came to her lips. She wanted to move, but her sudden fear overwhelmed her, paralysed her limbs. A cold sweat broke out in great beads upon her ice-like forehead.

The signal was working!

Probably at that very moment someone—some satellite of that man she already dreaded and loathed, who was sitting there on the other side of the door, so calmly—was watching her from the door of the flat.

She could almost feel his eyes staring at her back; boring into her soul, laughing at her agony of mind.

She was caught, caught like a rat in a trap, with her way barred both in front and behind her!

CHAPTER XVIII

A MAN is not brave who has no imagination. Fear, being the complement to bravery, is as necessary for the latter to exist as it is essential for all component parts to be present in the production of any whole. Great deeds have been done by men and women without fear, but these people are not brave in the highest sense of the word. The hero, or heroine, is the individual who, feeling fear, overcomes it. And fear is the natural child of a vivid imagination.

Patricia's imagination was active, and in most cases she was thankful for the gift; but at that moment she would have given almost anything to have been born without it. Kneeling there before that door, she could feel her way barred in front of her; she felt that she had only to turn to see some man, some satellite of Green Hood, whom she already hated, staring at her from the entrance to the flat, probably a cynical smile playing about his lips. She saw, still in her imagination, the man approach her, fixing her eyes with his own, ever coming nearer, whilst she remained motionless, transfixed much as a bird before a snake.

Patricia shivered, an involuntary action which served, nevertheless, to bring her back to reality. Suddenly she felt able to overcome her fear, to turn, to look and see who it was behind her. She jerked her head

over her shoulder, and as she did so she placed one hand on the door-handle in front of her, the better to keep her balance.

She saw no one, nothing at all. The hall was, as it had previously been, in complete darkness.

Instead of reassuring her, this fact, if anything, increased her consternation. But only for a very short moment. She never doubted that there was someone in the room, someone who had crossed the threshold of the flat and thus set the warning signal in motion; and she felt that that someone was at that very instant approaching her, nearing the door before which she was cowering. But she realised that, even as she could not see him, this new-comer could not see her; and therefore, provided she were soundless in her movements, she might delay discovery. But it was necessary to move.

Patricia suddenly parted her lips in a soundless scream.

That was the greatest effort of will of the whole appalling evening, not to allow herself the relaxation of that one scream. For she had felt the door-handle, the knob on which her hand was resting, start to turn under the light pressure of her fingers.

They were coming from each side, converging on the door. And she was in between.

Patricia, the need for instant action at once obvious, found herself once more in full control of herself. Up to that moment she had been half-paralysed by the speed with which events were happening. But now something of their speed became imparted into her.

In a flash her hand left that door-knob. She half rose simultaneously, and as soundlessly as she was able she moved quickly back to the corner in which she had previously concealed herself.

She turned. The door was half-open, and a ray of light from the other room flooded the hall. But her corner, as she had known it would be, remained in shadow, since it was on the same side of the wall as the door leading into the lighted room.

The man in the lounge suit, the man she had previously seen set in motion the warning signal, appeared. He flashed his torch, the rays downward as before, once towards the entrance to the flat.

The space was illuminated, but, the crouching girl realised, in such a manner that from the outside no hint of occupation was discernible. But this did not interest her at all. She had seen, in that fleeting moment, the whole of the centre of the hall, right up to the front door. And no third person was present.

Just for one second Patricia stared, fascinated, at the empty space. Then the man flashed his torch away, and allowed the rays to lead directly opposite him, playing on the fireplace. Without hesitation, he walked over towards it.

Patricia watched him. Her thoughts were in a whirl. Where had she gone wrong? She had seen the warning signal set in motion; later, she had seen the little green lamp suddenly light up on the table. The connection had seemed obvious. Yet this man paid no attention to the entrance door to the flat. His interest was obviously centred on the fireplace opposite.

As on a previous occasion that evening, the girl decided that introspection, and its accompanying theorising, could be left until later. At the moment her one interest must lie in the movements of this man, however incomprehensible she might find them and the green light.

Still obviously entirely unsuspicious of any other presence with him in the hall, the man crossed the intervening space between him and the fireplace. When once there, he paused and extracted something, a small object, from his pocket. He allowed the rays of his torch to fall upon this.

The reason was at once obvious. The small object was a bunch of keys, a small bunch consisting of three keys only. The man required the light to select the one he needed.

From her position, only a few yards from him, Patricia could obtain a perfect view. Quite involuntarily, her left hand closed on the bag which she was carrying, closed on the keys within it. For it did not require very good eyesight to recognise, in the bunch now lying in that other's open palm, an exact replica of the bunch at present in her bag, lately mislaid by the man John Daly—the Yale keys, and one little black one, attached to a small black ring.

Breathless with excitement, the girl watched. The man selected one of the Yales. He then twisted an ornamental metal flower on the fireplace, to disclose a keyhole. He applied the key to this. Evidently it turned easily.

As he did so he looked to his right, over his shoulder.

Something impelled the watching Patricia to do likewise, to look in the direction in which the man was looking. She found herself staring at the fourth wall of the hall, the bare wall opposite the entrance to the flat.

And as she watched, part of it appeared to become detached. There was very little light, only a subdued illumination coming from the open door of the lighted room. But to Patricia part of the wall appeared to be falling in.

The realisation of what was really happening came to the girl a moment later, and with it a sort of awe. A door, a secret door, was slowly opening in that wall under her eyes; a door which was in no way discernible to the naked eye; a secret door which was immeasurably superior to any other door she had ever heard of, in that the spring which actuated it was not anywhere on the same wall itself, to be discovered by chance by prying fingers. Patricia caught herself admiring, although grudgingly, this, the latest manifestation of the power and efficiency of the gang.

But she did not allow her thoughts to stray for long. She had suddenly remembered the sentence which she had heard Green Hood pronounce not so very long before: "They are late"; and the answer given by the man she now could see, standing by the fireplace: "It'll take them some time. She's got to get them into the passage, safely, and then they must be overpowered by the gas and brought round again."

She? They?

Patricia frowned. She knew that the answers were forthcoming now. She had no idea what she would

see. But she felt anxious, not for her own safety, but from a feeling of foreboding which she could not control. She realised suddenly that she wanted to close her eyes, to shut out the sight of those who were about to enter the room. She had a sense, a prescience almost, of the proximity of an event which she would loathe.

The secret door had now opened to its full extent. Patricia, spell-bound, watched its even motion cease. A woman stepped through the opening in the wall.

She was wearing, this woman, a fur coat hung loosely from her shoulders, and not fastened. Patricia caught a glimpse of a dress underneath it made of some dark green material. On her head she had a small hat, made of felt, of the same shade.

Patricia looked at her face. There was something vaguely familiar in the features, and this girl, for she was young, was pretty.

There was something reminiscent in the coat, and also in the hat. Patricia racked her brain for an inkling of the truth, some hint of where and when she had seen this girl before.

In one blinding flash full realisation came to her. She looked quickly at the girl's face, and saw again the features which she had seen, from her point of vantage in the avenue outside that afternoon, looking from the second-storey window out on to the little group of men below. She looked once more at the hat, at the coat, and both of these she recognised as those worn by the woman whom she had seen arrested and removed in a taxi-cab so shortly afterwards.

The shock of this discovery, and all that it por-

tended, was tempered by Patricia's desire to miss nothing of what happened. She remained, motionless, soundless, concealed, crouching in the obscurity of her corner.

The woman, with just a nod to the man by the fireplace, passed straight into the lighted room. The next moment she heard the voice she knew to be that of Green Hood, wearer of the jade signet ring:

"Congratulations, my sweet. I am relieved to see you, relieved and proud."

She heard a light, musical laugh.

But a noise from the still-open secret door riveted her attention on it, preventing her hearing any more of the conversation.

A man appeared, the back of a man, dragging something. A dark shape was being carried into the room through that door. Patricia suddenly recognised in that shape a human body.

The man proceeding backwards came right through the door into the hall, and Patricia realised that he was supporting the head and shoulders of an enormous man. Soon also the legs of this senseless man were visible, carried by another of the gang.

At first Patricia thought that the body they were carrying was lifeless, and she shuddered. She had never before been in such close contact with death, and it made her feel a little faint. But she was soon reassured; the two men, having carried the body into the room, incontinently dropped it. A low groan became audible.

The man by the fireplace spoke:

"Nicely trussed up?"

"You bet!" answered the nearer of the other two.

"Give any trouble?"

"None."

"So much the better for him. And the others?"

"Down the passage, in their cubicles."

The man by the fireplace laughed. The sound grated on the watching girl's ears, so harsh, so mirthless did it seem.

"Right," he said abruptly. "Get back and look after them. I'll bring this cove along when the Chief's done with him."

The other two turned. Just as they were about to disappear, however, the man by the fireplace spoke again.

"How many were there?"

"Him," said the other, pointing to the motionless body on the floor, "his friend, and four froggies."

"Including Dubonnet?"

"Yes."

At the mention of the French detective's name, Patricia stiffened. Suddenly a vague fear seized her, almost took away her breath. With a new interest, almost with stark apprehension, in her heart, she looked again at the senseless body on the floor.

The huge size, the great shoulders, both confirmed her worst fears.

Both of the gangsters who had carried the unconscious man into the hall had now disappeared the way they had come. The man by the fireplace moved over to the body, kicked it roughly with his foot until it

was lying on its back. He leant over and flashed his torch full into the face.

Patricia only just managed to restrain a gasp of horror.

She was looking at the face of Victor Caryll, pale as a corpse, eyes closed, hair disarranged, almost unrecognisable, so ill did he appear.

A faint trickle of bright red blood oozed slowly from one side of his mouth, providing the only touch of colour to his countenance.

CHAPTER XIX

BEFORE Patricia's horrified gaze the man leant over the unconscious form of Victor Caryll and peered into his face. For a long moment he remained quite motionless. The girl crouching in the corner felt a sensation of physical nausea welling up and striving to overpower her senses. The climax came when, stretching out one hand, the man lifted back one of Caryll's eyelids. This he let drop abruptly, and straightened himself. But that touch, unfelt by the unconscious man, had almost been sensed by Patricia on her own fair skin.

The man, now on his feet, stood stock-still. Patricia lost all direct interest in him. Her single, almost overpowering sensation was that of loneliness. In one fell swoop her entire world seemed to have come crumbling about her slender shoulders, crushing them mercilessly with the height of the catastrophe. For Patricia now understood: she realised that, with Caryll, his friend Wilson and the best brains of the Paris Sûreté had been outwitted by that man in the adjoining room, through the medium of the woman she had so lately seen walk jauntily past within a few feet of her.

She was alone—alone against as murderous a gang of ruffians as ever she had conceived in her wildest dreams in childhood, as unscrupulous a set of rogues

as ever any policeman of the world had had to combat. In her previous actions of that evening she had been buoyed up with the thought that she was doing it all to help the cause of justice, to help the man Victor Caryll. But now, with the sight of him lying powerless and senseless before her eyes, with the knowledge that Bill Wilson and Dubonnet, and also others of the French detective force, were all prisoners, captives of this man she feared and loathed, this sense of hopelessness bade fair to crush her spirit. For what could she hope—she, a frail girl alone against Green Hood and all his resources? How could she hope to succeed where Victor Caryll and his experience had failed?

A low groan interrupted her sombre thoughts. Anxiously she looked towards the huge form supine on the ground. Patricia looked at Caryll's face.

The faintest tinge of colour seemed to be returning to his cheeks. The trickle of blood had ceased, leaving only a dark smear to mark its passage.

The man standing behind him knelt again, and not unkindly supported his victim's head; in his other hand he held under Vic's nose a small bottle, which Patricia guessed to contain smelling salts; and a moment or two later Caryll opened his eyes.

He was dazed. He looked like a child just awakened from deep slumber, utterly unable to grasp the significance of his position.

But to Patricia had come new hope. The very fact of Caryll's return to consciousness seemed at least partially to have restored her nerve. She watched him closely, watched the first look of utter bewilderment,

watched a dawning realization come into those steel-grey eyes. She saw him make a quick movement of his elbows, and find his arms pinioned behind him, find himself unable to move them.

Then he smiled.

Patricia longed to cheer. She felt just as if she were in the stalls of some cinema, watching out of the darkness the unfolding of some great drama. She herself felt detached, as if she had no part in the play. She had just witnessed a brave action, and she wished almost overwhelmingly to register appreciation.

"That's the spirit, Vic!" she cried to herself. "That's the great idea! While there's life there's hope. Oh, gee, girl, that's certainly a man for you!"

Watching anxiously, intent on missing nothing that happened, Patricia saw Caryll rise to a sitting position on the floor. He turned his head and looked at the other kneeling beside him.

"Thanks very much, old top!" Caryll smiled again. "Admirable things, smelling salts. And a loathsome thing, gas. Well, what do we do now?"

The quiet effrontery of it all, so characteristic of the man and yet so rare, thrilled the watching girl.

"That's great, Vic! simply great," she whispered to herself. "I'm here to help you. Keep it up!"

The meaning of her own words suddenly struck her. She realised abruptly that she had spoken nothing but the truth. A moment before she had been bemoaning her fate that everything had gone all wrong, that she was left alone. But now she understood the true significance, and cursed herself for not having realised

before. If the knowledge which she was amassing of Green Hood was of importance, and might have been of use to Vic, now far more could she help him. He was captive in the lair of his enemy, but she, whilst also in that lair, was free. It was quite possible that she might prove to be the pivot on which the whole affair might turn.

Thrilled at this new complexion thrown on the events of that hectic night, Patricia thanked her Maker for the luck that had been hers. She had wished to help, to be of use. The opportunity had been given her —a far greater opportunity than ever she had expected. Indeed, Patricia realised abruptly that everything depended on her: the pursuance of this warfare by Law on outlawry, the safety of these the leaders on the side of Law, and, of even greater moment to her, the safety of the man before her, the safety of Victor Caryll.

Patricia wondered if just a faint tinge of extra colour were flooding her cheeks.

"I wonder," said she to herself, very softly, rather tenderly, "if Vic is half as nice as I think he is?"

"Feeling better?"

It was the kneeling man who spoke.

"Thank you," said Vic. "I am distinctly better. The effects of the gas are wearing off, leaving me with as pretty a headache as any as yet conceived by mind of man. I am, however, fog-bound. I mean I can't collect my wits. To whom am I indebted for this hospitality?"

The man laughed.

"You're a cool card, anyway." The compliment was

given ungrudgingly. "You'll know soon enough, don't worry. Have a spot of this."

As he was speaking he had taken a silver flask from his pocket. This he held to Caryll's mouth.

"Thanks." Caryll leant back his head, and took a gulp. "Ah! Not so indifferent! I always think, you know, that one of the pleasantest things about gas is that one can usually claim a little brandy afterwards. Now my dentist, a most charming man, knows brandy when he smells it. He's got rather a good nose. Whenever I go to . . ."

"Stow it."

The voice was harsh. Then the man smiled, almost as if involuntarily.

"You'll want all the breath you've got in a minute," he said apologetically.

"Is that so?" Caryll laughed. "Well, just at present I haven't got a great reserve. Most of my ready breath has been knocked out of me, so, if you don't mind, I won't talk any more. But as I was saying, he's a great fellow, my dentist. You should meet him. He's got a better taste in brandy than you, you know. You might pick up something from him. You haven't got a doubtful molar, or a blind eye-tooth, or anything like that, have you, which could serve as an introduction?"

Caryll's eyes were moving about him quickly as he spoke. Patricia, from her refuge, watched him closely, with undisguised admiration. Evidently Caryll was speaking, talking nonsense, in order to gain time, to collect his rather scattered wits, to size up the situation.

He was off again almost at once:

"Well, later on, when we all get back to London, I must try to arrange a meeting. Remind me, old chap. I've got a bad memory, but I just love to be of use in any little way like that. I can remember once, when I was younger, meeting an old friend in the street. He asked me if I'd like a drink. I said, 'Oh, no, not in the least.' You know, sarcastically. What happened? I'll tell you. He took me seriously. When he'd gone I went into a public telephone box and wept."

Patricia suddenly realised that a new danger confronted her. Were Vic to carry on in this strain much longer, she would be in peril of giving herself away by laughter.

"How sad!"

"Yes. A great disappointment. Talking of disappointments, I once dreamt that a dark horse would win the Derby. It did, at a hundred to one. But I'd never even heard of it. I backed Black Prince."

"Good-evening, Victor Caryll."

The voice, suave yet containing an ominous suggestion of cold hatred, came from the door of the lighted room, and made Patricia jump violently and cower back into her dark corner.

"That's funny!" Vic did not even turn his head. "You didn't speak, did you? I thought I heard someone whisper in my ear. Quaint, these hallucinations. Now, I can remember——"

"You will have plenty of time to write your reminiscences later on." The voice altered not one jot. "For the moment, however, I wish to have a few words with you."

Very slowly, very deliberately, Victor Caryll turned his head.

"Good God!" he said. "Robin Hood!"

Somehow, Patricia wished he wouldn't be so light-hearted. She had no illusions about the peril in which Vic found himself, of the unabating hatred for him of this man standing in the doorway. She was afraid for Vic; afraid lest, by his facetiousness, his refusal to take his position seriously, he might goad this his bitter enemy into killing him out of hand.

And as a mental picture rose before her eyes, a picture of Vic, lifeless, gone for ever, a cold shiver ran down her spine, her throat seemed to contract. Patricia realised—and, realising, thrilled herself—that Vic's safety meant a lot to her, a great deal more than merely the pursuance of the chase after this monster. But, as well, she understood now that his only chance of ultimate safety lay with her, in her own slight hands.

"We meet again, Caryll."

"So we do, old boy, so we do. Now tell me, Sinclair, why the old hood?"

The other laughed, shortly, mirthlessly.

"A leading question! However, I will answer it. My features are known to few of my gang. It is as well that they should not be broadcast. There is less chance of—er—effective infidelity."

"Now, isn't that wonderful!" Vic had turned to the man in the lounge suit, still kneeling by his side. "He thinks of everything, doesn't he?"

"Thank you." The voice was as urbane as ever. "That little touch is, in point of fact, that considera-

tion of trifles which distinguishes the true artist. However, to business. You should never have believed that Anne would give me away, Caryll."

"That's right," Vic laughed. "First trap and gas a man, then truss him up and tell him just where he went wrong. But don't say, 'I told you so.' Because you didn't."

"Not perhaps in those words. But I think, in my last letter, I mentioned something about looking forward to seeing you soon."

There was a pause.

"He's right, you know." Caryll spoke seemingly to the air all around him. "Funny that you'd forgotten that. The chap's quite right. He did."

"I am glad that you remember. I said that I was looking forward to seeing you. Now that the occasion is with us, I am delighted."

"Yes, I look prettier all bound up, don't I?"

The taunt went home. Patricia noticed that Green Hood's right hand suddenly clenched.

But for a moment he said nothing. Patricia looked from one to the other: Vic, sitting up, was idly watching his captor—idly to all outward appearances at least; but to Patricia, watching closely, there was a keen look in his eyes.

"Go to it, Vic!" she whispered to herself. "Keep it up, my dear. We'll get him yet!"

Vic suddenly turned himself round on the floor, so that he now sat directly facing the man who was framed by the doorway.

"It has occurred to me," he said abruptly, "that my

position isn't very dignified. I mean sitting like this on the floor. Correct me if I am wrong, but supposing you untied my ankles, then I could stand up without support, and that would be nicer, wouldn't it?"

Sinclair, for Patricia now realised that this was Green Hood's real name, laughed shortly.

"Well tried, Caryll. Unfortunately, I don't give a damn for your dignity, and I know your strength of old. And understand me clearly, for I have no more time to waste. I accuse you now of three things: interference with my plans, by butting in like this; insulting my wife, by believing that she would betray me; and last, but by no means least, you are directly responsible for my extremely displeasing life of the past two years and the ruin of what was a most profitable business. Have you anything to say?"

"Now, now, now! You don't mean to tell me you're annoyed with me?"

Sinclair paused just for one moment. When he did speak, it was very deliberately, and his voice was very harsh.

"It is for just that reason that I had you brought here before me—to tell you what you knew already, that I was annoyed; to give you an example of what happens to people with whom I am annoyed."

He motioned to the man in the lounge suit, who immediately rose to his feet and moved to the entrance of the secret door.

A sound as if of footsteps was at once discernible.

The man in the lounge suit moved to one side. There appeared at the entrance one of the men who had carried Vic into the room not so very long before.

This time he was half dragging, half carrying another, a man bound just as Victor Caryll was bound. But Patricia, from her refuge, scarcely recognised the apparition as a man.

His face was drawn—drawn to such an extent as she would never have dreamed possible. The skin round his eyes was loose, and there were great black rings underneath. His eyes themselves were dazed, almost as if there existed a thin, transparent veil over each.

"Pierre!"

The exclamation came from Caryll. Patricia did not know the man, but evidently Vic had seen him before. Sinclair had started to speak again, and she resumed looking at him.

"You are right, Caryll. That—caricature is Pierre. He was well enough when you last saw him, yesterday. To-day he is not so well. To-morrow he will be worse. The day after—if he lasts so long—he will be very much worse. Why?"

Sinclair paused and shrugged his shoulders.

"He tried to double-cross me, that's why. To save his own worthless skin, he agreed, as you know, to spy upon me. That was the act of a madman."

He paused again, and watched Vic staring with horrified eyes at the man he had seen so hale and hearty such a little time ago.

"I always make an example—an example for the rest of my men—of anyone in my employ who fails. Pierre not only failed, but also was a traitor. I have no mercy."

"But—what are you doing to him?"

Vic's voice was very low, so low that Patricia scarcely heard the question.

"What am I doing to him?"

Sinclair again signed to his satellites. The man in the lounge suit went up to the cringing Pierre, and roughly pulled his shirt, his only covering, aside.

Clear for all eyes to see, the two letters "TR" seemed in some way to have been tattooed on his chest. Patricia looked closely, and as she did so a feeling of acute physical nausea came over her. She shut her eyes quickly, to blot out the awful sight, to prevent herself from fainting.

The letters had been branded on the man's chest. The flesh all round was raw and inflamed.

The voice, as toneless as ever, of the arch-monster not five yards from her, reached the girl's ears:

"Every morning and every evening one letter is added, until the whole word 'traitor' is inscribed. But the only other man with whom I have had to deal in this way did not last out the necessary time. He only reached the second T. You see, I am as merciful as I can be. I hurry the process slightly. Pierre is not receiving any food."

He laughed.

Never in her life did Patricia quite succeed in forgetting the sound of that laugh. So mirthless, so cruel a sound seemed an impossibility. That a laugh, which is by nature joyous, could be so caricatured as this one she would never have believed had she herself not heard it.

"Take him away."

The men leapt at their leader's command. In a trice they had half pushed, half carried the luckless Pierre once more through the secret door, to the mystery beyond which was his torture chamber.

"They say that we cannot see ourselves as others see us." Sinclair was speaking again, but this time not so suavely as before. There had come into his voice more than a hint of passion. It was still harsh, still coldly cruel, but now there seemed to Patricia to be an undercurrent also of bitter personal hatred directed at Vic. "It is in order to controvert that theory that I have permitted you a glance at Pierre. You see, you will very soon be like him, Victor Caryll. You, who have caused me all the misery, the poverty, which has been my lot in the past two years. I have dreamed of revenge, and now the time has come. There will be one difference in your case, however. Strictly speaking, you cannot be called a traitor. We must therefore use some other word. Have you any suggestions?"

Caryll was intently watching his enemy. He showed by nothing that he realised the awful plight in which he was—not by so much as the flicker of an eyelid. Patricia's admiration for this man, who could face his tormentor in such a manner, increased tenfold.

"Why not 'Meddler'?"

It was a female voice speaking. Patricia glanced round quickly. Unobserved by her, the woman she had seen arrested, the woman referred to as Anne, had entered the hall, and was standing next to Sinclair, looking down at Vic.

"Oh, very good, my dear! Do you fall in with Anne's suggestion, Caryll?"

Caryll laughed. That he could do so in such circumstances, and make the laugh sound natural, thrilled Patricia to the core.

"Certainly, old bird. Anything to please a lady."

" 'Meddler,' then, it shall be. A pretty word, my dear. I should think the first letter will be particularly painful."

He laughed again, and once more that laugh struck terror into Patricia's heart.

"Well, we'll start in the morning, Caryll. For the present, I hope you will pass a pleasant night. Don't think about it too much, please. Anticipated pain is so often worse than the actual fact."

Once more, for the last time, he signalled to his satellites. The helpless Caryll was picked up and carried through the secret door into the darkness.

But as he went, he turned his head and laughed, a laugh full of defiance, full of courage.

Once again did Patricia long to cheer.

CHAPTER XX

THE man and the woman standing by the door of the lighted room remained quite motionless for a few moments after Caryll's forced exit through the secret door. Patricia, from her corner, watching them narrowly, longed for a chance to see the features of this monster in human shape. He remained, however, quite still, the green silken hood covering his head, a sort of ethereal figure; to Patricia, personifying all that she hated most in all the world.

The girl was shaken, badly shaken. Up to the arrival of that poor tortured being, she had been too excited, too thrilled by the many strange events happening all round her, really to appreciate the danger which she faced. But with the arrival of the man called Pierre, with his proximity, had come an awful realisation of what she herself might expect were she discovered. And with this realisation had, to a certain extent, come fear.

But Patricia was a girl of spirit. Her beauty did not lie on the surface—in the features, or her colouring, in the perfection of her body. Beauty in her case was not skin deep, but penetrated beyond her fragile whiteness to as thoroughbred a heart and soul as ever existed. Patricia, fearing, yet did not flinch. She knew that the one hope of Victor Caryll, of Wilson and

Dubonnet, lay in her hands. She knew that the safety of those two kidnapped girls also lay in her hands. She was determined to be worthy of the trust.

But what to do? She had so little time. Presumably those three, the woman Anne, Sinclair and the other green-hooded gentleman, would now soon disappear. When once they had gone, she would again be in sole possession of the flat. But not in sole possession of the mysterious passage-way behind that secret door, although she felt quite confident that she possessed the all-important key.

Her fingers closed over her handbag.

The female voice, that of the woman called Anne, interrupted her thoughts.

"Coming, John?"

Patricia, glancing up, saw that she was looking back into the lighted room. Then, for a moment, the crouching girl examined the face of the other woman.

Anne, thought Patricia, looked hard. There was nothing in her face, even in her eyes, even remotely suggesting that woman's virtue of gentleness. Grudgingly, Patricia was forced to confess that this woman was pretty, even beautiful. But to the watching girl her beauty was the beauty of an iceberg; a superficial appearance of frailty, without soul, without warming blood.

"Gee!" she said to herself, "she's surely hard, that woman; if you collided with her in London you'd rebound to the Statue of Liberty and hit it at speed!"

A man's voice from within the room answered the woman, the voice Patricia had heard before—of the

other man, the man who had taken no part in the scene she had just witnessed:

"Yes, I'm coming. Just turning out the lights. Where are we going?"

Sinclair, from the doorway, laughed.

"It has been a most successful evening," he said, "and I think Anne deserves a little recompense. What about a little supper at Fouquet's?"

"Sure."

One by one the lights went out in the other room, and as they did so the illumination in the hall decreased. As within the room the last light was extinguished, a bright beam from a torch sprang out from where Sinclair was standing.

The woman Anne moved over to the secret door, still standing open. She was followed by the rather portly figure of the man called John, and Sinclair brought up the rear.

One by one they disappeared through the opening in the wall. Patricia heard a click.

She guessed what it was, but actually there was just enough light left, coming from the opening, for her eyes to prove to her that she was right. The ornamental rose on the fireplace had sprung back to position; the door in the wall was slowly closing.

By watching the ever-narrowing streak of light, Patricia was able to judge the moment when the door finally closed. She waited a full minute after that; then she stood up, and leant against the wall the better to ease her poor cramped limbs.

She was now in complete darkness. She allowed her-

self the luxury of a great sigh of relief. Once more she was alone.

There was still something to be done, however. She had got to be quite sure that no trick was being played, that no one was still present with her in that flat. Stretching out her arm along the wall, she moved slowly its entire length, keeping her fingers pressed tightly on the surface. She reached the opposite side of the hall without feeling any unevenness. Then, and then only, did she relight her petrol lighter.

There was nobody in the room. There was nothing unusual about the room. That secret door was back in place, giving no sign, no clue of its presence.

Patricia decided that it would not be wasting time to have one quick look at the room in which Sinclair and that other man had waited. She moved across the hall quickly, and looked in, holding her light above her head.

Her first glance rested on the table opposite. The warning lamps had been removed. But with this discovery came a new idea. What of the machinery in the hall, that handle she had seen worked by the man in the lounge suit?

The idea was disturbing. These men were too efficient, thought Patricia, to have left it ready to be worked except on purpose. In any case the fact of removing the two warning lamps from the table would have reminded them of that switch under the mat by the door. Patricia puckered her brow in a frown.

If not left on by oversight, what was its use now?

There could be only one solution. Evidently were

someone to enter the flat now, the signal would work somewhere in the mystery behind that secret door, warning some watcher. Perhaps there was some method by which an intruder into the flat could be watched from without.

Patricia shuddered. She realised more than ever now that in her movements of that evening she had been the protégée of the Goddess of Luck. Had she arrived at the flat only a few minutes later than she actually did arrive, her coming would at once have been made known to the gang, and her capture would have been a matter of minutes only. All that that would have meant came before her mind in one awful vivid flash.

The girl thrust the thought from her. She realised that to allow her imagination such play could do nothing but harm, since it would undermine her nerve. There was plenty in actual fact with which to contend without adding fancies to the reality; and, above all other things, she had to keep her nerve. A lot had happened already that night, but a lot more was to happen. Patricia had no illusions on that score; she only of all in the world knew of the true facts, knew what had happened. In her lay Victor Caryll's only hope.

She decided on an initial course of immediate action. She would spike the enemy's guns for a start, as far as she was able, by moving that switch back again, by putting the warning signal out of action.

She returned to the hall and moved straight over to the entrance. Her mind made up, Patricia wanted only to get the thing done. Kneeling beside the mat, she

lifted the corner. She put her hand steadily upon the switch, and pulled.

It moved easily in her hand.

She sprang to her feet, looking apprehensively over her shoulder towards the wall opposite. But nothing happened. Patricia smiled to herself. Now, as far as she herself could make it certain, her venture into the mysterious unknown behind that secret door would be unheralded. For the girl had made up her mind. She must get through, get hold of Caryll, give him the keys and thus make possible his escape. She knew the risks she ran, but she knew even better the remorse of soul, the awful contempt she would have for herself for ever after if she failed him now, and left him to what was nothing else than torture.

"Anyway," she acknowledged to herself, half shyly, "you'd like him out, wouldn't you, Pat? You'd like to . . . say, are you getting sentimental?"

She asked herself the question just in order to reassure herself that she was not. Yet, had she been as honest with herself on this question as habitually she was in other things, Patricia would have realised that Vic's conduct in the awful circumstances in which he found himself had made a whole lot of difference to her. Previously she had liked him, had trusted him, but more or less out of her woman's intuition. Now, having seen him lose none of his self-possession even when faced by the almost immediate prospect of this monstrous revenge which Sinclair proposed to exact from him, the girl felt that her instinctive judgment had been vindicated.

She thought of the letters which she had seen branded on the chest of the unfortunate Pierre Meunier. She thought of the discoloured and swollen flesh. She thought of that word which the green-hooded monster proposed to brand on Victor Caryll, one letter each morning and each night until the whole word "meddler" was burnt thereon—if he lived long enough!

In an agony of apprehension, Patricia cried out in a subdued whisper:

"No! Never! My God, never!"

She was calm again at once. The sound of her own voice, even in its hoarseness, pulled her together. She looked around her quickly.

"Come on, Patricia!" she said, half aloud, half to herself. "Come on, my girl. You've got to go in after him, and get him out. He can't do it for himself. You are his only chance. Get a move on, Pat, you funk! What are you waiting for?"

But on reflection she did wait just a little longer. She had heard Sinclair arrange to go to Fouquet's, to have a little supper. Best let them get clear away before she ventured through the secret door.

She looked at her wristlet watch, which she had set such a short time before in that private suite of the Ritz in the Place Vendôme. What an age ago it seemed to her now, after all that had happened in the interval!

Then, suddenly, Patricia realised something else, realised the strain through which she had lived in those hectic minutes. She felt old, felt tired. She longed to lie down just where she was on that dusty

floor—to sleep, to forget in her slumber the foul events which she had just witnessed.

Metaphorically she shook herself. Such thoughts made for a lack of thrust, made for inaction; and she realised full well that above all things she still needed all her nerve, all her thrust, all her ability for what still lay before her to be accomplished. The consequences of failure were too frightful to be contemplated, too frightful not only to herself, but also to Victor Caryll.

She looked at her watch again.

"A quarter of ten," she said to herself. "Pat, my girl, in five minutes you're going through that door."

She looked at it. At least she looked at the wall, for although she knew its exact position, it was impossible to distinguish from the rest of the wallpaper. She felt in her bag for the keys.

Her fingers closed on them almost at once. She withdrew them, looked at them, replaced them in her bag.

She looked at her watch again. Only one minute had passed.

"That was a long minute," said Patricia to herself.

She walked over to the empty fireplace, sat down on the floor beside it and leant back against the wall. She extinguished the petrol lighter, in order to save the precious spirit. She closed her eyes.

"No sense in not resting while you can."

She was right, but therein lay a hidden danger. Patricia realised it almost at once. The strain had taken its toll, she was dog-tired. And closing her eyes had nearly proved fatal, nearly sent her to sleep.

Relighting the wick, she once more looked at her watch.

"Two minutes more."

A vision of a face rose up before her eyes, a man's face so white that it was deathlike in its pallor. She saw, once again, that small trickle of blood, bright red, from the corner of the mouth.

Patricia scrambled to her feet.

"It's all right, old fellow."

She laughed.

"I'm coming."

She looked at her watch for the last time. Quickly she put her hand into her bag and withdrew the keys.

She turned to the ornamental rose on the fireplace.

CHAPTER XXI

AS Victor Caryll found himself incontinently picked up, despite his great weight and size, and bundled through the opening in the wall through which he guessed that, when unconscious, he had been brought to the room, he found his thoughts to be chaotic.

But, as the nature of the man was the very acme of defiance to all authority which he did not himself recognise, he turned his head just before it was too late and laughed, putting all the challenge into that laugh that he was able. It mattered little to him, in the moment of that laugh, that he was powerless, bound hand and foot, and that in consequence his defiance must of necessity seem futile. The fact of registering his feelings, publicly, was all for which he wished, all he knew that he could hope to obtain; and as the sound went forth into the room from which he was being so unceremoniously bundled, he felt a real glow of pleasure.

The moment it was over, however, Vic realised in its full force the awful plight in which he found himself. He understood full well that he was caught, a prisoner in the hands of his most brutal and unscrupulous enemy. He knew that he could expect no mercy, and, worse still, that he could hope for no help. The *coup* had been well planned, and, quite unsuspecting,

he and the others had fallen into the trap just like a set of greenhorns.

"Dash it, old cherub!" he laughed to himself bitterly, "you gobbled the bait just like any old stupid trout!"

But it had been a good bait. Anne had deceived them properly, giving the only reason, Vic suddenly realised, that could have persuaded him to believe her disloyal to her husband.

"What's the old tag?" he asked himself. "'Hell hath no fury and cetera.' By heaven, if the man did scorn her, I shouldn't care to be in his shoes, anyway! My present position would be a picnic compared with his!"

He laughed, out loud. One of his captors, the man in the lounge suit, looked at him strangely.

Vic suddenly grasped the significance of that look. Evidently the man thought that the strain had been too much, that he had lost his senses. An idea came to him, was considered, was viewed from every angle in his fertile brain.

They were advancing along a passage, towards a light which shone a few yards in front. Vic realised that, were he to try out his plan, he would have to make up his mind at once.

Anything, no matter how desperate, any plan which had the smallest chance of success in this dire situation, was worth a try out. Vic made up his mind. The idea was, at least, faintly plausible.

As they reached the light, Vic saw that they had come to the end of the passage. An open gate faced

them, and suddenly he realised that they were opposite the empty shaft of a lift. There was a press button on one side; this was pressed by the man in the lounge suit.

"I should like some wine," said Vic.

Both men looked at him sharply. He smiled vacantly, and put his head on one side.

"I should like some wine," he repeated.

"You'll be lucky if you even get water," growled the man in the lounge suit.

"Oh, that would never do! I can't drink water. It rusts me so."

Vic smiled again.

The two men looked at each other. The man in the lounge suit raised his eyebrows slightly. The other nodded.

"Dippy," he said.

Vic turned his head, and looked long and seriously at him.

"Dippy?" he said, "Dippy. Dippy? Where have I heard that word before?"

From the depths of the shaft a lift could be heard ascending.

Suddenly Vic's face clouded. He frowned ferociously at the man beside him.

"Why the hell don't you answer me?"

He lurched forward towards the man, who instantly hit out with all his might. The blow glanced harmlessly past Victor's chin; a more astute man might have recognised in the very faint movement a man well versed in the intricacies of the ring.

But by this time the man in the lounge suit had

seized Vic by the shoulders, had dragged him off his balance and let him fall heavily to the ground. He stood for a moment above him in a threatening attitude, ready for an emergency.

The lift, empty, had arrived at the top of the shaft. Vic noted quickly that it was of the electric self-working pattern.

He sat up and smiled broadly.

"I should like some wine," he said.

The man in the lounge suit evidently made up his mind.

"All right, old man. You'll get some downstairs. Come along into the lift."

He leant over Vic as he was speaking, and dragged him to his feet.

"Thank you so much," Vic laughed again, rather loudly, rather wildly, "but I should like it hot. Can I have it hot? Steaming!"

He looked around fiercely for a moment.

"Yes, yes, any way you like."

Vic allowed himself to be dragged into the lift. The man in the lounge suit pressed another button. The lift started to descend.

The lift was illuminated by electric light, and Vic was able unostentatiously to examine his bonds. His hands were tied together behind him with, as far as he could tell by the feel, fairly stout rope. This supposition was confirmed by a glance at his feet; these were securely fastened by rope of just this description.

"There's a chance, old cherub. Keep it up!" he murmured to himself.

All the way down in that lift Vic smiled first at one

and then at the other of his gaolers. Only once did he speak, and then he remarked to nobody in particular:

"Most awfully hot."

They reached the other end of the shaft at last. The two men helped Vic out of the lift. He looked around him.

He was in a great shallow hall. Subterranean he guessed it to be, for it had no windows and was lit entirely artificially. In this supposition he was helped by the fact that he had descended in the lift a fairly considerable distance, and he knew the level whence the descent had started. He had made no sign, but he had recognised in the room in which he had been brought face to face with the green-hooded man whose voice he had recognised as Derek Sinclair's, the hall of the flat in which he had arrested Anne earlier that very day.

A long table ran down the centre of the hall. On each side, built into the walls, there were cubicles, not unlike the bunks of a sleeping-car. These were fitted with curtains, but not many were drawn.

Vic, looking into these cubicles, saw on one couch the face of Dubonnet, the eyes closed, the cheeks dead white. Next to him there lay his friend Bill Wilson, in the same condition.

For a moment Vic thought that they were dead; but only for a moment. Then he remembered the gas which had overpowered them as well as himself. Evidently, in their case, no attempt had been made to bring them round.

"Where's the wine?" he asked abruptly.

"I'll bring it in a minute. Come along."

It was the man in the lounge suit who spoke. He helped Vic across the floor to a door directly opposite the lift. This he pushed open, and the pair went through.

Vic found himself in a room entirely devoid of furniture except for a wooden table in the centre with one wooden chair drawn up to it. Into this chair Vic found himself pushed.

"I'm just going to get it."

"Steaming!"

"All right. I won't be long."

The man disappeared through the door. He didn't shut it entirely, however, and Vic could see him engaged in earnest conversation with the other man who had helped to bring the captive down. Evidently they were discussing his mental condition.

Vic racked his brain to remember the characteristics of all the insane people he had ever seen. He knew full well that it would be difficult to convince Sinclair, the master criminal, and as such always suspicious, that he was mad. That he would have to convince him, and shortly, he did not doubt. His strange behaviour was bound to be reported, and in all probability Sinclair would come to him at once in order to see for himself.

Vic understood that the essential was delay. If only he could delay his own torture, delay the vengeance which Sinclair was probably even now meditating on them all, there remained a hope, although a very slender one. Finding that they did not return, the Sûreté would be sure to send out search parties. These, Vic

realised at once, were unlikely to be successful. But in them lay their one chance, the only possible hope.

If, by his madness, he could cause either delay or a lack of vigilance over him, there remained just a faint ghost of hope. Sinclair, in his hate for him, would be reluctant, he felt sure, to put him to a torture which his mind could not appreciate. He might keep him a prisoner for a while, hoping that he would recover, after the fashion that birds were fattened for the slaughter. He might also think him a negligible quantity in his madness, and relax the watch over him. Anyway, in his assumed madness lay the only chance, not only for himself, but also of those others, lying in those bunks outside, still in the grip of that nefarious gas. And not only they, but also the safety of the two French girls depended on this delay, the girls who were hidden somewhere on the premises, he felt sure, and whose release had been the original object of that activity which had culminated in the disastrous expedition of that evening.

What did madmen do? Vic hoped that at least he had started on the right track. He remembered the words of a doctor he had once known, a doctor who had answered when asked just that very question.

"It depends almost entirely on what sends them mad. If madness is in any way hereditary, then the slightest thing is enough to unbalance the mind. Any severe strain can do it, sometimes in the most surprising people. It will make them suddenly become obsessed by one thing, and fly into passions, violent passions, unless their slightest whim is granted on the subject.

Apart from this one thing, their obsession, these madmen often appear quite sane."

Victor Caryll laughed.

"Wine!" he said suddenly.

He looked out again, out through the crack left by the half-open door. His two gaolers were standing by the bottom of the shaft, but the lift had disappeared. The man in the lounge suit was looking up the shaft.

A moment later he was standing to one side, and the lift gradually reappeared. From it Sinclair, his wife Anne, and another man whom Vic had not before seen, also in evening dress, stepped out. Both men were wearing hoods of green silk.

"Another Robin Hood!" said Caryll to himself.

The man in the lounge suit immediately started an excitable conversation with his chief. Caryll's eyes left them and wandered to Anne.

He looked at her closely. Somehow she was now very different from the Anne he had known of old, very different also from the Anne whom he had arrested earlier that day. There was an indefinable something —a cold, cruel glare almost—clearly visible in her eyes. She carried her head high, her whole poise seemed to radiate a frigid outlook on life, a passionless entity. Certainly she was as beautiful as ever, but her beauty was of feature only.

Vic caught himself comparing her with someone else, someone he scarcely knew. Before his eyes there came a vision of Patricia Daly, immeasurably beautiful, utterly desirable, slender and perfectly formed in

every limb of her small self. Vic thought of her eyes, in which had been clearly discernible a look of an intelligence above the average, of a loyalty unswerving, of a trust complete.

He frowned. The thought of that girl, now in his mind, inevitably contrasting with the woman he could see through the half-open door, unsettled him. He realised that she had made a lasting impression, greater than that made upon him by any other woman he had met. He realised that he was determined to see more of her, much more of her.

"But to do that, old idiot," he remarked, almost savagely, to himself, "you must continue to live!"

He looked again at Anne. Somehow she now repelled him. Beauty she might have, but that was more than neutralised by her expression, by her lack of soul.

"That woman is so hard," said Vic to himself, "that I'd like to use her face to press my trousers."

Sinclair moved suddenly, and Vic realised that he was coming towards the door. He braced himself for the ordeal; he knew that the crisis was at hand. Were he to succeed in making his captor believe in his madness, a faint hope remained. But if he failed, then there appeared to be no hope at all.

Sinclair reached the door. He stood in the entrance, looking at Victor Caryll. Vic could make nothing of his expression, because the silken material effectively concealed it. In a flash he understood that this fact presented yet another difficulty; he would be unable to see if he were making any impression, and, if so, whether he were on the right lines or not.

"Have you got the wine?" asked Vic.

The other made no reply.

"Have you got the wine?" asked Vic again, this time more loudly.

What was it the doctor had said? "They fly into violent passions unless their slightest whim is granted."

He gave Sinclair no time to reply to his repeated question.

"Why haven't you got the wine?" he shouted, struggling to his feet. "You cur! I sent you for it, I . . ."

Vic got no further. He had forgotten, for the moment, that his feet were tied, and he had found it quite impossible to retain his balance. He pitched headlong on to the floor.

As he fell his head glanced the leg of the wooden table.

The blow did not stun him, but Vic lay still, his eyes closed tightly. It gave him an opportunity for a rest, an opportunity which he sadly needed. He had no means of telling if his performance were convincing, and he felt that the less of it he could give the better it would be, provided the ruse were successful. It would be so easy to overstep the limits of credulity.

He sensed Sinclair come over to him. He dared not open his eyes to look, although the impulse was well-nigh overwhelming. He felt his head lifted.

"Get some water."

It was Sinclair's voice which said the words.

He heard the sound of retreating footsteps, rather as if of someone running.

For a few moments nothing happened. Then he

heard the voice of Anne, startled, asking a question.

"Is he really mad?"

Sinclair answered shortly.

"I don't know, my dear. He might well be. No one can deny that in a sense Caryll is an extremely clever man. The line between a great brain and insanity is very thin. He's been through a lot. It may have turned his brain. But if it has . . . I shall be most bitterly disappointed."

"What will you do?"

"Well, hold the others to ransom, of course. We should get a good deal for old Dubonnet. And if Caryll is mad, there's no point in killing him. He wouldn't appreciate it. We might as well get what he will fetch with his friends."

No other words were spoken until the return of the man sent for water. But what he had heard had been digested by Caryll. He had now an added incentive for his task.

Water was suddenly dashed over his face and temples. By a great effort of will Vic remained quite motionless and gave no sign. He felt himself propped up, and a glass held to his lips. He was forced to drink.

He opened his eyes, not too suddenly. He looked about him in as stupid a manner as he could manage. He pretended suddenly to see the glass.

"Ah! Wine at last."

He thrust his head forward towards the glass. Sinclair, who was holding it, put it to his lips. He took a sip.

At once Vic assumed as ferocious an expression as he was able. He drew back his head sharply, and spat the contents of his mouth on to the floor.

"That's water!" he shrieked at the top of his voice. "That's water! I'm being rusted! I told you water rusted me!"

He struggled violently with his bonds.

Sinclair stood up.

"Put him in——"

He got no farther. He stood stock-still, facing the open door, facing the hall outside.

"Who has worked the lift?"

There was an electrifying silence. Vic, looking quickly at the shaft, saw that the lift was no longer there.

There was a long silence.

"No one down here?"

"No one, chief."

It was the man in the lounge suit who answered Sinclair.

"And we left no one upstairs," said Anne, suddenly, in an awed voice.

Sinclair moved with incredible rapidity. In a few strides he was at the bottom of the shaft. He looked up quickly. Then he returned to the door of the small room.

As he did so Victor Caryll noticed a small but vicious looking automatic in his right hand.

"It is coming down," said Sinclair quietly, an ominous note in his voice. "I wonder who our uninvited visitor may be?"

CHAPTER XXII

THERE was a tense moment of suspense. Sinclair remained motionless, facing the shaft, his revolver held ready in his right hand for immediate use if necessary. The others stood round, evidently feeling the strain; Anne was placed directly behind her husband and was looking over his shoulder. Now that there was complete silence, a stillness which added rather than detracted from the prevalent incertitude, the faint noise of the lift descending in the shaft was plainly audible.

"I should like some wine," said Vic, from the floor.

He laughed gaily. Sinclair whipped round, his face white with passion.

"Shut up, you brute!"

He kicked the recumbent man viciously. At any other time Victor Caryll would have resented that kick, would have given in return more than he had received. But two considerations stopped him; and decided him to store up the incident as yet another factor for the final settlement when Providence should so arrange that it should come. The first was a matter of diplomacy; the second, however, interested him far more at that moment.

Sinclair's shoe had caught him on the ankle, but for-

tunately not directly. It had caused him a jar certainly, but he had been struck more with the instep than the toe. His right leg had moved.

Caryll looked up quickly. Sinclair had turned, and was once more facing the shaft of the lift. Vic, resting on his elbow, looked down at his feet. His heart leapt within him; that kick had put the final strain on the rope which tethered his ankles, which had proved more than it would stand. The knot was loose.

Working with great speed, and yet absolutely silently, Vic moved his legs about until he had loosened the rope considerably more. Then, very carefully, he disentangled his right foot.

He looked up again quickly. To his great relief, he saw that all those standing by the door had failed to see him, so interested were they in the lift. Very rapidly, but still absolutely silently, Vic rose to his feet.

The whole operation had occupied a few seconds only.

Vic, owing to his height, could see over the heads of the others crowded round the door. As he watched, the floor of the lift came into view at the top of the shaft. It was descending, slowly but evenly. A second later, and two feet appeared. Another second, and two slender ankles.

There was a woman in the lift. Of that there could be no possible doubt. Vic stared dumbfounded.

But only for a moment. A vision came to him of just such ankles; in imagination he was once more in the lounge of his hotel, bidding farewell to a girl who

had attracted him strangely. He remembered, as she stood up to take her leave, that his glance had fallen downwards, to note and admire as slender a pair of ankles and as perfectly formed feet as ever he had seen. Surely there could not be two women in the world both possessed of such perfection?

The lift had descended now almost to full view. The head and shoulders of the girl were still concealed; but it was apparent now that she was dressed for the evening, in a black frock of shimmering beauty.

"This is very strange," said Sinclair.

His voice held indecision. For a moment he lowered the revolver in his hand.

The head and shoulders of this strange visitor came into view.

"Good God!"

It was the other man wearing a green silken hood, and not Sinclair, who let the exclamation escape him.

"Thank you," said Victor Caryll, inwardly, to the unknown man. For had he been able, those were the very words he himself would have used.

The girl in the lift was Patricia Daly.

A look of terror came over her face. Abruptly she shot her hand out to her right. Evidently her fingers were at work on the buttons which controlled the lift, for it stopped before reaching the floor level, and suddenly started to ascend again.

"Stop that lift."

The words formed a command, issued by Sinclair, to Patricia Daly. She paid not the slightest heed. Already her head and shoulders had disappeared.

Sinclair did not hesitate. Abruptly he levelled his revolver, pointing it at the girl's body.

Vic acted so quickly that no one had time to realise what had happened. His right foot shot out and up. There was a sharp crack as toe of boot met wrist. The report of the revolver shot drowned a cry of pain.

But the shot had gone wide. It was Sinclair, and not the girl, who had cried out.

"I should like some wine," said Victor Caryll.

He said it from the floor, for the high kick had caused him to overbalance and fall heavily. Sinclair had whipped round, his eyes blazing uncontrolled anger.

He saw Caryll lying quietly, a cherubic smile on his countenance.

Sinclair, for one moment, lost his head. He made a dive for the revolver lying on the floor beside him, and levelled it at Victor Caryll, only a yard from the smiling face.

But Vic continued to smile. His thoughts were chaotic, but one thing only impressed itself above all the others: he must continue to be mad, for if he showed the slightest sign of fear, he realised that the itching finger on the trigger of the gun which menaced him would tighten.

There was a pause—a pause which lasted barely a second, but which seemed an eternity to Vic. Never before, he realised, had he been so near death; never before did life seem so dear, so much to be desired. But he knew, almost instinctively, that whether he would live or die depended absolutely on his own conduct in that frightful moment.

"Can't you bring me some wine?"

He said the words plaintively, rather in the tone of a petulant child. That one short sentence cost him more dearly than any other in his life. It required almost more power of will than he possessed to keep up the fatuous pretence in the circumstances.

But even in this extremity Vic's sense of humour saved him, as it had so often saved him before. Somehow, those words, if they were to be his last, struck him as quaint. A plaintive request for wine, more wine; was that characteristic, was that a suitable thought with which to go over to the other side?

He laughed, loudly, rather recklessly.

Undoubtedly that laugh saved him. It was the last straw, the final proof, to Sinclair, that the man had lost his senses. It seemed incredible than a man could laugh, laugh into the barrel of a revolver not a yard from his face, held in the twitching hand of an arch-enemy.

Sinclair stood up. Beads of perspiration were showing on his brow. He also had been through a bad moment, a very bad moment. He had almost given himself away before members of his gang, almost shown himself the servant of human passions just as much as any one of them. This did not suit him; part of his power over them lay in his almost uncanny coldness, his complete control over himself.

Now, master once more of his mind, he gave his orders quickly.

"John, take Anne at once to Fouquet's and wait for me there. You three, get out by the other way and *get that woman.* You saw her face?"

The man in the lounge suit answered quickly:

"Yes, chief."

"You'll know her?"

"Yes, chief."

"There must be no mistake. I shall investigate the leak whereby she got the information to get in. But our safety depends on her annihilation."

One of the men laughed. Out of the corner of his eyes, Vic saw that he had taken a long and wicked-looking knife from his pocket, and was fingering it almost lovingly, gloating over the sharp blade.

"It is late enough for the job to be easy. There oughtn't to be many people about," he remarked.

"You have plenty of time to get round and cut her off. But—be quick. And no mistake."

"There will be no mistake."

"Right. I'll wait for you here."

"What about him?"

The man in the lounge suit, who had asked the question, pointed to Vic, who was still lying on the floor.

"I'll attend to him," said Sinclair viciously.

Their instructions received, the men moved off rapidly. The man in the green hood took Anne by the arm and pushed her gently through the door. The sound of their retreating footsteps came to the two men left face to face in the small room; a few moments later the sound also of a door closing came as from a distance.

They were alone together, Sinclair and Victor Caryll —once friends, now bitter enemies.

Sinclair's first action was to close the door of the

small room. Then, turning, he removed the green silk hood from his head.

Caryll had scrambled to his feet. He looked at his captor with interest. This was the first time that he had seen him for over two years, and silently he noted the changes.

They were more marked than the passage of those two years warranted. The face, which had once been good looking, was no longer so. It was thin now, and sallow. Sharply-defined lines ran round the mouth and on the forehead. The dark hair was rapidly greying over the temples.

"It's a pity, Victor Caryll; a great, great pity."

Vic smiled amiably. He realized that Sinclair still thought him mad, and therefore more or less harmless. It was up to him to confirm this impression, for thereby might come a chance.

His legs were free, but still he was at a great disadvantage with his hands securely pinioned behind his back.

"Any chance of a spot of wine?"

He said the words mechanically. His thoughts were far away, not thinking of his own danger. Vic's mind was obsessed by the girl he had so lately seen, standing in that lift and framed in the shaft. She had had no business to be there, but how in the world she had succeeded in finding out this crook's retreat he was at a loss to understand. Nor could he make even a vague guess at her motive, since she had been so obviously dismayed to find herself in the presence of Sinclair.

Great beads of perspiration made themselves felt

on his forehead as he thought of her, that frail, beautiful Patricia—thought, in an agony of apprehension of her. Men, desperate men, were speeding even now to cause her death, to murder her in cold blood; whilst he, powerless to help, was standing in front of the man who had so ordained it, quite incapable of wreaking even vengeance.

Vic felt the veins in his forehead swelling as if they would burst. He struggled with the rope which bound his arms, but that at least had been securely tied. He gained not one inch of freedom by his efforts.

Sinclair moved to the table, drew up the chair and sat down on it with his back to the door. He stared fixedly at Caryll, opposite him on the other side of the wooden table.

"A great pity, Victor Caryll. I was looking forward to putting you to torture, to seeing you writhe under the red-hot knife. For every bad turn which you have done to me—and God knows there are many—I could have forgiven you, if only your brain had lasted long enough for you to realise it. I am bitterly disappointed."

Never had Victor Caryll heard such intense venom put into the human voice. He had been under no illusions with regard to his relations with this man Sinclair, but not until that moment had he grasped fully with what loathing the other regarded him.

He smiled happily, however, even broadly. There seemed nothing else to do.

"I said a moment ago, to Anne, that I'd sell you, with the others, for whatever you would fetch. Now I

don't think I will. Even in your madness you can be an infernal nuisance. A moment ago you prevented me shooting down a spy. It makes very little difference, really; my men will get her all right. But—it's a nuisance. I wonder if I'd better shoot you—now?"

Vic realised that Sinclair was thinking aloud—whether consciously or not, he could not tell. It was, in a sense, rather nerve-racking. But he realised also that it was infinitely less so than if the man had just sat there staring at him fixedly, thinking his dark thoughts and saying no word all the while.

Vic realised also that time was slipping away. He dared not let his thoughts stray to Patricia, lest the expression in his face should betray him. For her he could do nothing; he could only hope that Providence would be with her and protect her. But those men, whether successful or not in their infamous project, might be expected to return soon. Judging the situation dispassionately, he had perhaps twenty minutes in which to accomplish something.

He understood only too clearly that this was the last chance that he would have. Anything might be decided when they returned: to kill him at once or to keep him a prisoner. But—and this was the point which was only too clear—never again would he find himself with such a measure of freedom, and with the odds so little against him.

They were great enough even as it was. Sinclair had a pistol; he was unarmed. Sinclair had full use of all his limbs; he could not move his arms.

He continued to grin foolishly. But he turned over

in his mind the possibility of success were he suddenly to launch himself with all his weight at the man sitting opposite him. There was a chance that Sinclair, in falling, might stun himself.

But, except as a last resort, the idea at once seemed too fantastic. If it were unsuccessful, he could expect no mercy. While it might not necessarily prove that he was not mad, yet it would establish definitely that he was dangerous. Either alternative would bring about the same result, which would mean his instant death.

Yet, alternatively, there seemed nothing he could do.

Sinclair, a slightly perplexed expression in his eyes, was still staring at him. He had stopped thinking aloud; but he was evidently engaged in turning over in his mind the thorny question of what he was to do with this madman now on his hands.

Some power outside him made Victor Caryll look at the door.

"Wine!" he said abruptly. "Do get me some wine!"

Every nerve was on the alert, the blood of his body was racing through his veins. It was all that he could do to prevent any trace of the excitement which he was suppressing with an almighty effort from creeping into the intonation of his voice or the expression of his face.

It was essential, absolutely essential, that Derek Sinclair should not turn his head and look behind him, for Vic had seen the handle turn and the door start to open.

There was something furtive about it all, something

which gave Caryll hope when hope had almost gone. The whole thing was being done so slowly, so soundlessly, that he felt convinced that whoever it was on the other side opening that door, was desirous only of attracting as little attention as was possible. Surely not, then, one of Sinclair's men?

Mad ideas raced each other through Caryll's brain. Could it be that Bill Wilson, that Dubonnet even, had come-to from the effects of the gas and managed to free themselves? Could it be that . . .

Sinclair sat abruptly back in his chair. The sudden movement paralysed Vic, but only for a moment. In his anxiety, his nerves had played a trick on him. He had expected him to look round, to spoil it all.

Sinclair's voice came to him almost out of a mist.

"I have decided, Caryll. You are too dangerous to set at liberty again. This—unfortunate affliction of your brain may only be temporary. In the circumstances, I do not think that I should take the risk. Therefore, I propose to shoot you—now. You are lucky. This will be an extremely quick—and relatively pleasant—death."

By a superhuman effort of will, Vic nodded several times. Then he again grinned broadly.

The door was now sufficiently open to admit a human being.

Caryll, out of the corner of his eye, watched in breathless excitement.

Patricia Daly looked round the door into the room.

CHAPTER XXIII

VICTOR CARYLL acted then with incredible rapidity and with no warning whatsoever. He had waited, at great risk to himself, just long enough to make sure that the door was being opened by friend, and not by foe. With the knowledge that it was Patricia who was there, he banished at once any astonishment which he might have felt at her entirely unexpected entry. He put aside a feeling of immense relief at seeing her, safe and sound apparently, far from the clutches of the ruffians who had been sent to "get" her. He dismissed as entirely beside the point any thoughts that entered his brain which took from his mind the one essential. It was manifestly of paramount importance at once to put Sinclair out of action.

Lowering his head abruptly, he half ran, half leapt, at the man sitting opposite.

He had thought of this plan some time before, but dismissed it until, as a last resort, it would be the only chance. But he put it into operation now in no way as a last resort. Now it was a definite offensive whence he hoped success might come. With Patricia there, with Patricia ready to help, the odds which before her advent would have been against him were now very even. An automatic, and an active man behind it, on the one side; a desperate human ramrod, sup-

ported by an agile and intelligent girl, on the other.

The top of Vic's head caught the amazed Sinclair full in the chest; the chair gave way and toppled backwards. Both men crashed to the floor.

But Vic was on top. He put his enormous weight to the best possible use, pinning Sinclair to the ground, striving by every means in his power to keep him there. And then began a superhuman struggle.

All the while he longed for the use of his arms. If only they were unfettered, then the fight could have but one ending. There was no question as to which of the two contestants was the stronger physically. Apart from that, Vic, always in the pink of condition, was likely to last the longer.

But—there remained the automatic. It had fallen from Sinclair's hand as he fell backwards with the chair; it had fallen within his reach and suddenly he saw it. Like lightning, out went his right hand.

His fingers were practically upon it. A neat shoe kicked it just out of reach. A small hand bent down and picked it up. Out of the corner of his eye Sinclair realised that the barrel was now pointing unswervingly at his right temple.

"I should stop struggling if I were you," said a small, rather scared voice, striving to be fierce.

As abruptly as it had started, the battle ceased.

"Thanks most awfully, Pat," remarked Vic, rising from the floor. "Get down, you!" This viciously to Sinclair, who made as if to rise.

Still keeping the pistol pointed at Sinclair, Patricia answered:

"Not a bit, Vic. What shall we do now? Shoot him?"

Vic laughed, a short laugh.

"My dear," he said, "that would save endless trouble, but, somehow, you know, I should like this cur to take his trial. No, for a start I suggest that we transfer my bonds to him."

"All right."

Caryll, watching Sinclair ceaselessly, moved over to Patricia, but stood with his back towards her. Then he spoke, and his voice was as hard as steel.

"If you move, even by so much as the tip of your little finger, Miss Daly will shoot you down at once. Is that quite clear, Sinclair? She is very ready to do it. You owe her a lot, you know. She suggested it a moment ago, as you yourself heard. I stress this point, in case you should take it into your head that she might hesitate. Such an idea would be fatal—to you."

Patricia wondered at the personality of the man; she had expected something of the sort, but scarcely this remarkable exhibition of his amazing power over his fellow-men. Placed in circumstances which could only detract from his individuality, with his hands still bound behind his back, yet Victor Caryll rose above it all. He seemed to radiate a power, a rather mysterious but very definite power, which demanded obedience to every one of his spoken words.

Sinclair did not reply. He lay where he was, motionless, glowering at the man who had turned the tables on him so abruptly and so unexpectedly.

Laying the automatic on Vic's broad shoulder, Pa-

tricia struggled with the rope which bound his arms. Her deft fingers made short work of the task. In a moment Vic stood up, a free man once more, again in full control of all his limbs.

He breathed a sigh of satisfaction and also of relief. He had feared lest Derek Sinclair might act in spite of the warning; he had feared also that had it come to necessity Patricia's nerve might have failed for just one second—it takes a good deal of grit to shoot a man—and any hesitation, in the circumstances, no matter how well justified, would have been fatal.

Quietly he took the pistol in his left hand.

"It is scarcely necessary to remind you, I think, that I am rather a good shot with my left hand?"

Sinclair made no direct reply to the half-statement, half-question. Instead, he remarked almost to himself:

"What a fool I was!"

"To believe me mad?" Vic laughed. "We've both been fooled, Sinclair. I by Anne's story, which I must confess I believed and which landed us all into this mess; you by my impersonation of a lunatic. The whole point is that he who is a fool first is sane last. Not very true, I'll agree, but do you get my meaning? I am intending to convey to you that, barring accidents, I am now definitely on the winning side. Out of the cart, in fact, or very nearly."

"Not if you chatter like that, Vic. For heaven's sake let's get out of here."

Patricia's voice was almost plaintive.

Vic realised two things simultaneously. The first that the girl beside him had spoken nothing but the truth;

the second that he had been guilty of thoughtlessness in his natural exhilaration at being once more free.

At once he became the very personification of activity.

"Take the other rope from my right leg, will you please, Pat?"

The girl bent down, and did as she was bid. She stood upright again, and handed it to him.

He passed the automatic over to her.

"If he gives any trouble at all, let him have one with my love."

Swiftly he knelt down beside Sinclair, pushed him half over on his side, and tied his arms firmly behind his back. When this was completed, with the other piece of rope he trussed up Sinclair's legs. All the time Patricia stood watching vigilantly, ready at the slightest provocation to make use of the firearm in her right hand.

But there was no need. Sinclair had suddenly become cowed, seemed to have no spirit left with which to make a final fight of it. Meekly he allowed Victor Caryll to do with him as he willed.

This surprised Caryll. He had expected Sinclair to put up a better show than this—to make some sort of fight of it at least. But the man was the personification of meekness. In a way it irritated Vic, and made him suspicious as well. Here was a man who could well be called a master criminal, a man whose brain had successfully baffled the police of two continents over a period of years, making a very poor finish of it. Victor

Caryll looked at him whom he had just bound hand and foot, and there was contempt in his eyes.

Quickly he rose to his feet, and, turning again, took the pistol from Patricia's hand.

She smiled at him. Vic, watching her face and catching the smile, suddenly felt an insane but well-nigh overwhelming impulse to crush her slender form to him. He restrained himself with an effort, lowering his eyes. He was half-ashamed of himself, yet he knew that to this girl he owed his freedom. That, however, was but a subsidiary emotion; there was one far greater and quite new to him which puzzled, almost pained him. Victor Caryll, hitherto the perfect example of bachelordom, realised that this blessed state, at least as far as he was concerned, was doomed.

He looked up again quickly. Patricia was still smiling, but somehow the smile was different. A faint touch of added colour to the cheeks, the very slightly parted lips, the expression in her eyes, all betrayed her, although she did not know it. Now she understood why he had looked away so quickly. Her woman's intuition had given her, in one second which had passed as a flash, just that assurance for which she would have been willing to barter even a portion of her soul.

"Pat."

"Vic."

The names were whispered, were wholly inaudible except to the two principals. Perhaps they were scarcely pronounced. But to Vic, and to Patricia, there came a great understanding, a great knowledge. Both knew now, although no word had been spoken, that they

were pledged the one to the other. There was no need for words. There was no need for anything more definite. Each understood perfectly that, unexpressed as yet though their love might be, yet there remained an implicit faith, held by both, in the outcome of the question which, when circumstances permitted, Vic would ask of Patricia.

The girl smiled again, a smile which was infinite in tenderness, yet which served to bring Vic back to the present situation.

"What next, Vic?" she asked.

At once Vic, the lover, gave right of way to Victor Caryll, the police officer.

"We must get the others out—and quickly." Vic's voice was brusque, but the listening girl understood. "We can leave this johnny to look after himself for a bit. Pray heaven that gas has worn off by now!"

Vic led the way from the room into the hall once more. Rapidly he moved over to the bunks which contained his allies. Patricia followed him.

It was the work of a few minutes only to free them all. None was completely under the influence of the gas which had been used to trap him, but only Bill Wilson was once again completely master of himself. On being freed, he showed a real appreciation of the situation by asking no questions, but by setting to work at once in helping Vic and Patricia with Dubonnet, and the other three Frenchmen.

These four were carried, or helped to walk, according to their respective states of consciousness, to the lift. Then Vic turned to Bill.

"Take them up," he said curtly. "At the top you'll find a passage. Go along it. At the end there's a secret door; you must get that open at all costs."

"That'll be easy."

It was Patricia who had spoken. She now handed the bunch of keys to Wilson.

"It's the Yale key which does it. Yes, that one. The other two are for use from the other side. I tried it before I came down, to make sure my retreat would not be cut off."

Bill Wilson took the keys.

"As soon as you get these lads through the door, old cherub," went on Vic quickly, "you will find yourself in Anne's flat. Don't look so surprised, you'll make me laugh. See if there's a telephone. . . ."

"There isn't," Patricia remarked.

"There isn't, so knock up one of the adjoining flats and use their telephone. Take no refusal. Get on to the Sûreté, give the address, and demand a posse of police at once. By then we should be with you. If we're not, bring them along down. Don't forget to send the lift down as soon as you've finished with it. I may be in a hurry."

Bill Wilson hesitated for a moment.

"What about Patricia?"

Victor Caryll smiled.

"Most unfortunately," he said quietly, "she must remain with me, if she will. I'll bet those two lost girls are somewhere on the premises, and I don't want them spirited away before the police arrive. Patricia, having been a captive, may recognise some of the landmarks. Are you game, dear?"

It was the first time that any endearing word had passed between them. Involuntarily Vic became a trifle self-conscious. Patricia laughed happily.

"Of course, Vic."

He covered his momentary confusion by immediate action, which actually was of paramount importance.

"Right. All clear, Bill?"

"All clear, Vic."

"Let her go!"

Vic turned on his heel, taking Patricia by the hand. Together they ran across the hall, and passed through the door which a short time before had been used by the men sent by Sinclair after Patricia.

They found themselves in a small, square room. One wall was non-existent, being composed of a gaping opening, obviously the entrance to a tunnel of some sort. On the opposite side there stood another lift.

"Ah!" The sound was drawn out, rather as if Vic had expected to find the curious sight which met his eyes.

"You were taken to your room in a lift, weren't you, when they kidnapped you?"

"Yes."

Vic smiled, and pointed.

"I'll bet that was it!"

Unknowingly, they were speaking in whispers. There seemed to be no need, but subconsciously there remained in their minds the fear that the gangsters might return unexpectedly at any moment. They had been sent to find Patricia, and this would take them some time, since she was not where they had been told they

would find her; but they might lose heart and return to report failure.

"Come on," said Vic gently.

They entered the lift. It was of the same type as that other, a self-actuating electric elevator. Vic pressed the first button; at once the machinery was set in motion, and they started to ascend.

The ascent took some time; neither spoke, but it seemed to Vic that they were rising above the level of a first floor. He was anxious—bitterly anxious—for it seemed hard to him that now, in his newly-found happiness, he should have to risk it all by keeping Patricia with him still in the danger zone. However, his answer to that very question implied by Bill Wilson's recent words was, he well knew, the only possible one. She could be of use, and if she were willing then he must make use of her. There were greater issues at stake than any of his own personal interests. The safety of the community, the breaking up of this great criminal organisation, depended largely on the success of this the most recent undertaking. Of Patricia's spirit, of her willingness to help to the uttermost of her power, there was no question at all.

Vic gripped the automatic taken from Sinclair more firmly in his left hand. Being left-handed had been useful to him in the past—very useful to him on more than one occasion, since it created an element of surprise. Should the necessity again arise, he breathed a silent prayer that it might be as useful to him in the future. There was something rather pleasing to him in the thought, which suddenly struck him, that it was

in the possession of this automatic, the pistol of Derek Sinclair, that unscrupulous leader of the gang, that this last coup became practicable. Without some firearm, this attempt at the release of the two kidnapped French girls would have had to be delayed, with possibly fatal results.

The lift stopped. They were before a door. Without any hesitation, Vic flung it open, and stepped through it.

He found himself in darkness. Once again Pat's lighter came into use. Vic was in a bedroom well, even richly, furnished.

A little cry behind him made him swing round, momentarily startled.

"That was the room, Vic!" Patricia, just behind him, uttered the words in a hushed voice. "That is the room in which I was imprisoned!"

"Good!" Vic's voice was even, but there was an excited light shining in his eyes. "Come on, my lady. I wonder who's the tenant of the room above?"

Quickly they returned to the lift, and Vic closed the door behind them. He pressed the second button.

This time they mounted a very much less distance. As before they came to a door.

Vic tried it, but found it locked.

"The key's in the lock!" whispered Patricia.

In a trice Vic had turned it; the door opened easily, and he entered. There was no need for the petrol lighter here. As he entered the room, the elctric light was suddenly turned on.

A girl screamed from the bed.

"Good God!" Vic laughed. "I'd clean forgotten it was the middle of the night. This is no place for a perfect gentleman, is it, Patricia, my love? Lucky I've got you to chaperon me! Explain the situation to her quickly, dear; we must hurry. Tell her to put on a coat and a pair of slippers. No time for more. I'll wait, blushing, in the lift."

He retraced his steps and disappeared from view, while Patricia, smiling happily, ran to the wide-eyed girl in the bed. In a very short time they were both with Vic in the lift.

"Good girl," murmured Vic, as he pressed the third and last button. "Only one more now. Prevent her kissing me if you can, Patricia darling. French people are so impulsive, and it'll be such a waste if she does. Somehow I feel that as far as a kiss is concerned all mine are bespoke."

Vic, in the semi-darkness, found and encroached upon the freedom of Patricia's hand. A faint pressure, answering his, filled his heart with happiness.

"Not yet!" he said to himself firmly—"not yet, you old wooer! There's a lot to be done before you can claim your beloved lady."

In her corner Patricia was thinking much the same thing.

The lift stopped before the third and last door. This also was locked, but again the key was in the lock. Vic flung it open.

Almost precisely the same little scene occurred. There was a startled shriek from the bed, and the light was turned on. Vic remained just long enough to as-

sure himself that there was no trickery, and then returned to the lift.

As he passed Patricia:

"Such modesty becomes me, don't you think?" he said, a smile on his face. "Hurry her up, sweetheart."

Patricia was eminently successful in so doing. A minute later, and the lift was on its downward journey.

Vic had an anxious moment when they again reached the level of the hall. The instant the lift stopped he was out and made a quick reconnaissance of the main room, but, to his great relief, nothing seemed to have changed since he had left it. It was deserted.

Rapidly he shepherded his three charges across the long room to the other elevator, which, as he had arranged with Bill, he found ready at the bottom of the shaft. They entered it quickly, and Vic set it in motion.

As they began to move, he looked across to the open door of the small room, that room in which he knew his arch-enemy to be lying helpless.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," he cried, just loud enough to make himself heard. "But I've been rather busy. I'll be back for you in a minute."

He laughed happily. All was well with the world just at that moment. Only a few more minutes, and that evening, which had started so disastrously, would in point of fact prove to be a night of complete and unhoped-for success. Vic could afford to laugh.

"Almost out of the cart, my sweet! Almost out of the cart!"

Something of his gaiety had been caught by the two released captives. The girls were chattering away be-

tween themselves, evidently thrilled at the totally unexpected turn which events had taken. They cast happy glances at Vic, realising that it was to him that they owed their freedom.

Patricia, listening to them, laughed suddenly.

"Are your ears burning, Vic?" she asked. "Some very pretty things are being said."

"If they want to kiss anybody," promptly returned Vic, "let them wait and kiss Bill. He'll enjoy it. He hasn't got any booked, except possibly one as best man!"

Patricia smiled. But there was a wealth of happiness in that smile.

They reached the top of the shaft, and were there met by the anxious face of Bill Wilson.

"Thank God, Vic! I was getting anxious. Oh, well done!"

This at the sight of the two girls.

"The police?"

Vic's voice was sharp.

"I got through to the Sûreté from the flat above. They said they'd send some fellows round at once. They should be here any minute now."

"Right. If I'm not up in five minutes, and the lads are here, come down after me."

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Vic, are you going down to get—him?"

Vic turned to Patricia.

"Yes," he answered simply.

"Oh, don't go by yourself! Wait for the police. Bill's just said they'll be here any minute. It's madness to go down again alone."

Vic took her hand and kissed the slender fingers, regardless of the small audience.

"My dear, I must. It may be a matter of seconds now before those fellows of his come back. If they do before I get there he'll get away. That would never do. I want him."

Abruptly he turned away and re-entered the lift.

"Let me come too!"

It was almost a cry. Vic smiled, and shook his head.

"Well said, dearest. But you've already done enough. From now on not one hair of your darling head is going to be risked—ever!"

He laughed and pressed the button. The lift descended at once.

To Vic, now very anxious to complete his task as soon as possible, that descent seemed to last an eternity. At length, however, the lift stopped at the bottom of the shaft. Vic sprang out and looked all round him.

As before, the whole place was deserted. A few strides took him to the door of the small room in which he had left Sinclair. He entered it quickly.

The room was empty.

Just for one moment Caryll stood there, stupefied by astonishment. Then, throwing theory to the winds, he realised that with Sinclair free he must be in acute danger.

With one bound he was back in the hall. But he could see no one.

He did not wait to investigate. He ran to the lift, jumped in, and set the machinery in motion. The lift started to ascend, but maddeningly slowly.

Vic felt beads of perspiration making their appearance on his forehead. He wiped them away almost savagely with his handkerchief. He hated any outward show of nerves, but he was forced to confess to himself that it had been a bad moment.

He had ascended about fifteen feet, or so he judged, when the lift stopped.

There was an electrifying moment of suspense—then, someone just below him laughed.

It was a mirthless sound, a terrifying sound. Vic felt himself breaking out in a cold sweat. He knew that laugh, knew it to be Sinclair just below him.

"Not so clever as you're made out to be, my friend. You forget the possibility of a master switch to this elevator, I think? Well, as you see, there is one."

Sinclair laughed again. Then his voice took on a new tone, one so fierce, so full of malice that even Vic shuddered, hardened as he was.

"Victor Caryll," the voice remarked, "I have to confess that this night has been yours. But you won't live to see the fruits of your labour. I hope you have no rooted or religious objection to cremation, because that is precisely what is going to happen to you."

Vic heard the two words: "Light it."

For a moment nothing happened. Then there came a roar of flame and almost at once a thick cloud of smoke began to envelop the lift creeping in from all directions.

"Was I so misguided," said Vic to himself, "as to suggest a minute ago that I was nearly out of the cart? I think I was. Am I? No, I'm sitting right beside the driver."

CHAPTER XXIV

BUT, although the words carried a jest, Vic was far from feeling any such light-heartedness. Force of habit, perhaps, or just his natural inability ever to be audibly serious, made him utter the words to himself. But they conveyed nothing to his mind.

Sinclair's remarks did not disturb him either. Indeed, he was thankful for them; for they made him understand a few seconds earlier than otherwise would have been the case the nature of his present predicament. Before the sound of burning came to him, before the smoke began to envelop him, creeping into the cage of the lift through every crack, he had obtained a vivid mental picture of what was about to take place.

Therefore he was not slow to act. Even as the first whiff of burning came to his nostrils, even as the first haze of smoke began to overspread the floor, he had reversed the pistol in his left hand so that he now held it by its barrel. He made a quick jump upwards, and struck viciously at the glass roof of his cage.

The shattered glass came down all round him, but fortunately did not cut him. He looked up quickly to see what damage he had done. A great hole was gaping in the glass above him, through which he could see,

as if a far-distant goal, the light at the top of the shaft. He wondered if by any chance Patricia were looking down, whether his friends above had heard or smelt the burning down below.

This possibility gave him no comfort. Even if they had, only a rope could help him now. And he knew for a certainty that of rope they had none.

But there remained the one chance, the only hope of safety for which he was working now. And that chance depended entirely on himself.

He set to work with feverish energy, jumping upwards and using the butt of the automatic as a pick-axe with which to knock away the jutting ends of glass from the top side of his cage. The smoke was getting thick now, threatening to suffocate him; moreover, the heat from the roaring flames below was becoming intense. Great beads of sweat formed on and dropped from his forehead.

At last he had cleared sufficient of the broken glass from one side of the roof to enable him to reach for and get a firm hold of the top of the cage of the lift, without fear of cutting his hands to shreds. This was of great importance to him. If there was one thing paramount in his mind, it was to protect his hands as far as possible for the great ordeal which lay before them.

Grasping the prepared space firmly, he jumped up and through the opening which he had made in the glass roof. He half pulled himself, half scrambled through. A moment later and he was standing on the top edge of the lift, steadying himself by means of

a firm grasp of the wire rope which stretched upwards from the cage to the top of the shaft.

He looked up. The light, the light which he must reach to save himself, seemed farther away than ever.

He smiled. But that smile was not one of humour, nor was it to encourage himself. It was a grim movement of the lips, not reflected in any way by the eyes. It was a symbol of the task before him.

He had to reach that light. There was only one possible means of doing it. He had to climb the wire rope stretching upwards, had to climb until he reached that light—and safety.

Vic wasted no more time. The heat and the smoke were both becoming insupportable. He had waited only long enough to steady himself, to regain his breath.

Seizing the rope firmly by both hands, he swung himself out over the gaping hole he had made of the roof of the lift. In a second his feet also had entwined themselves round the rope.

And then began a struggle which Vic was destined to remember for long afterwards. The distance in itself was sufficient to tax the strength of most men to their utmost, but the distance alone was not all with which Vic had to contend. As well there was the burning heat, the blinding smoke—both factors prejudicial to his chance of success.

But it was the only way out. When he had gone six feet Vic grasped the full magnitude of his task. He set himself to it with redoubled vigour, striving his utmost to climb quickly. This was essential; the heat was greater every moment, the smoke more dense.

"Talk of Turkish baths!" said Vic to himself. "Great Scott! I'll never have another in my life."

That was the spirit of the man—he never doubted, even in these dire straits, that he would live to put his resolution into effect.

He climbed another six feet.

The sweat was pouring from him now, issuing from every pore, drenching his clothes. It almost blinded him, gathering on his eyelashes and trespassing into his eyes. He closed these firmly. Still he kept on.

He rose another few feet.

His body seemed a ton weight. His arms seemed of lead, slow to obey the commands issued by his brain. His legs dragged themselves up sluggishly, every muscle taut to breaking point.

He covered a little more of the necessary distance.

The smoke was thicker now. A great crackling below him made him understand, without any necessity to look, that the flames had reached the cage of the lift, the cage he had just left. He knew full well that now, at any moment, the fire would take firm hold of the woodwork, that the flames would dart upwards hungrily, eager to add him to the number of their victims.

Desperately he strove to travel faster. His aching muscles responded gamely, did their utmost. But still his progress was painfully slow. More than ever did the smoke and heat, and his own sweat, worry him.

Another few heaves and Vic felt himself at the end of his tether. He paused, hanging on by grim persistence, by strength of will alone. He opened his eyes,

and looked upwards. Everything seemed blurred, but he could just make out that he had climbed only a little over half the distance. Some fifteen feet remained to be achieved.

He opened his mouth, tried to take a deep breath. This, he realised at once, was a mistake. The atmosphere was so laden with smoke that it made him choke. The convulsive movement put a greater strain on his waning strength.

Then, suddenly, he began to slip.

Vic exerted all his determination, tightened his fingers as much as he was able, clasped the wire rope as firmly as he could with both his knees. The heat was against him, the perspiration on his hands prevented him from getting a firm grip. Somehow, he managed to stop the slipping.

He looked down. He could see that the cage of the lift was burning brightly. The flames reaching up towards him were increasing in size every minute.

With a sigh which was almost a groan, Vic started to climb once more.

As he did so he happened to look at one wall of the shaft. He saw at once that, although climbing, he was making no progress.

For a moment Vic thought that the strain and horror of the situation had been too much for his brain, and that he had gone mad. For an appreciable space he failed to grasp the full significance of this, the latest development.

But only for one moment. Then he looked down quickly. The lift was once more in motion, was descend-

ing towards the very heart of the fire, going away from him. He, by climbing, was just managing to counteract the motion of the wire rope which otherwise would inevitably have taken him down with it.

This, Vic knew, was the last straw. This was the final blow which luck chose to level at him, the blow which would knock all his resolution from him. A dreadful feeling of lethargy crept over him, a feeling that Providence was definitely against him, and that since this was so there was no more use in struggling to save himself. A sob escaped him, an involuntary sob of physical exhaustion rather than mental agony; his brain was already fogged, already scarcely able any longer to appreciate the situation.

He longed, above all things in the world, to let go with his hands, to let everything go.

"Vic! Vic!"

A spasm passed through his body. His weary eyes opened and looked up. He could see nothing, and he closed them again quickly to ease the pain.

"Vic! My darling!"

Suddenly Vic understood. Patricia's voice, coming from the top of the shaft, pulled him together, as nothing else would have done. Gone on the instant was his fatal lethargy; a renewed activity filled him, filled his system.

The lift had reached the bottom of the shaft and had stopped. The floor had fallen in, a prey to the hungry flames. These shot up, leaping towards the man now climbing swiftly in a last desperate effort to escape them.

"You're not done yet! Not by any means, old cherub!"

It was Vic's war cry, though in truth it was more of a croak than any cry. But it served the purpose, served to hearten him. Patricia, for the second time that night, had saved him.

Peering anxiously into the darkness of the shaft, Bill Wilson beside her, both utterly regardless of the smoke, she saw the valiant effort. A great pride swelled within her as she watched the man climbing ever higher, ever nearer, to safety. She offered an inward prayer to her Maker that he might succeed, that her man might be spared to her.

Ever upwards he came, climbing regularly now. She guessed that it was will-power only which forced his limbs to move. She guessed that long since his clear-thinking brain must have lost most of its ability to gauge the situation. He was climbing automatically, climbing because something within him—something that he did not fully understand—told him to climb.

Foot by foot Victor Caryll won his way towards his beloved. A dogged perseverance kept him going, an inflexible resolution seemed now to dominate him. He was gasping for breath, making little choking sounds, each one of which seemed to cut into the heart of the frenzied girl above. Ever nearer he came to her outstretched hand.

He was only a matter of inches from it now.

She touched his hair. Leaning perilously over the edge of the shaft, held back and steady as far as he was able by Bill Wilson, Patricia sought and found Vic's

jacket. Her fingers closed on the cloth in a firm grip. She pulled with all her might, helping the exhausted man to cover the last necessary yard.

Dubonnet and some of the recently arrived police rushed up along the passage. Vic was near enough now to be pulled to safety. Willing hands were thrust out towards him, and a moment later Victor Caryll lay senseless on the floor of the passage. He had brought off the forlorn hope.

Patricia knelt beside him, mopping his soaking forehead with her handkerchief. An infinite tenderness characterised her movements. A woman is never so happy as when she can administer to her man.

Dubonnet's voice made her look up.

"You will excuse me, mademoiselle, if I appear a little heartless. But I am not. I am practical instead. We shall all be roasted here, if we remain. Quick! We must make room for the firemen. We will take our brave *camarade* to the Sûreté."

And so it was arranged. Vic was carried, still unconscious, from the building and into a waiting car. Dubonnet, Wilson and Patricia accompanied him. A uniformed policeman sat outside with the driver.

As they left the fire engines began to arrive.

They hadn't traversed more than the length of the Rue Picot when Vic opened his eyes.

"Dear, dear!" he said, "so I did it all right. Or is this heaven?"

He laid his head on Patricia's shoulder.

CHAPTER XXV

BY the time that the car had reached the doors of the Sûreté, Vic had practically recovered from his harassing experience. He was sitting up in the back seat, chatting merrily to Pat and Dubonnet, and although he still looked pale and rather tired, no one would have guessed from his conversation how near he had lately been to an appalling death. Pat watched him closely, and found a lot to admire in his debonair courage.

But when the doors of the Sûreté closed behind the small party and the latter had reached the privacy of Dubonnet's sanctum, there was at once a different atmosphere. Dubonnet looked across at Vic, and there was an unspoken question in his eyes.

Vic laughed.

"As fit as a fiddle, that's what I feel, old sleuth!"

Dubonnet smiled.

"A lot has been accomplished, thanks to you, monsieur, on this great night. France, and I, will be for ever grateful. But there is still work to do. That pest is still at large, the man you call Sinclair. I should like to get him."

"Unless he's roasted in his own grill," put in Bill Wilson, "there seems no reason to suppose that he can get away."

"There remains the tunnel, monsieur." Dubonnet spoke seriously. "Men were sent out after mademoiselle through that tunnel. There is no reason to suppose that it has fallen in. And, *nom de nom,* we do not know where it has its other end! If only I had known this, I could have posted men to keep a look-out near by and get the brutes as they came out. As it is, all that I could do was to post men round about the neighbourhood armed only with a description of the wanted men. I have little hope from this, however. The man Sinclair is clever; he would scarcely set the whole building alight unless he knew that he himself was able to get away when the need for flight came. No! Our only hope is that we may get him as he tries to leave Paris or France, perhaps to-morrow."

There was a long pause. Then, abruptly, Vic voiced the thoughts of them all:

"You'll be lucky if you do."

Dubonnet smiled rather ruefully.

"I am afraid, *mon camarade,* that you are right. But I have one other hope."

He paused again; then looked across to the chair in which Patricia was reclining, watching them and listening intently.

"Mademoiselle," he said a trifle brusquely, "I am very sorry, but I am afraid I must ask you to leave us, since I am about to talk of matters which are strictly confidential. My secretary's room next door is very comfortable, and is at present empty. Perhaps you would like to rest there while you are waiting for us?"

Patricia sat up in response, but she looked appeal-

ingly at Vic as she did so. In spite of her silence, Vic realised that she was more than anxious to stay.

Also it seemed to him that she had a certain right to be in at the finish. It was entirely due to her that the rescue of the two girls held to ransom by Sinclair had been effected, and, more of a personal matter, that he himself was there to tell the tale.

"Dubonnet, old cherub," he remarked, "you know your business best, of course. But a moment ago you said that thanks to me a certain amount had been accomplished to-night. You were wrong. Anything that I have done has been made possible by the wonderful efforts of Miss Daly. Couldn't you see your way to wave aside the red tape for just this once?"

For a moment, Vic, watching, thought Dubonnet would yield. Then, however, the other spoke:

"There is nothing, *mon cher,* that would give me greater pleasure. But you do not know what I am going to say, and if you did I think you would agree with me. I must ask you to note that time is precious and that it is passing quickly."

Patricia accepted the gentle rebuff at once. She got up and, with a grateful smile to Vic as she passed him, entered the adjoining room through the door held open for her by Dubonnet. He closed it carefully after her, and returned to his desk.

"I am sorry I could not accede to your request, Monsieur Caryll," he smiled, "but I am about to tell you something which might have given mademoiselle a certain amount of pain. That I wished to spare her, particularly as I am one of her greatest admirers."

He paused. Evidently he found it difficult to put into words what was in his mind. At last, however, he looked up from the blotting-pad on which he had been scribbling.

"Last night," he said, speaking rapidly, rather as if he had an unpleasant task which he wished over, "an American visitor to Paris staying at the Ritz sent in his card to me. On the corner he had written in pencil 'concerning the Obedient Servant.' Naturally I saw him at once. I saw him here, in this room. From the information which he gave me I at once started inquiries relating to another American visitor to my great city, also staying at the Ritz.

"He, my visitor, told me that recently, when sitting with his wife in the lounge of his hotel, he had noticed a man pass and light a match with which to ignite his smoke. The man had put the match down in an ash-tray close by. Something about that spent match-stick attracted his attention, and suddenly he realised what it was. That burnt match-stick was green. At first this did not strike him as being peculiar; all that occurred to him was that it was an unusual colour for a match, and one that he rather liked. You all know how our friends from the United States are rather given to the collection of souvenirs of their travels; well, my informant thought that he would like to take some of these peculiar matches back to America with him to use at home. He asked the *concierge* of the hotel if he had any, only to be told that the good man had never heard of them.

"As it happened, he met the man he had seen use

one not very much later that same evening. He stopped him, and explained politely his reason for wanting to know where these green matches could be obtained. The reception which his innocent inquiry received, amazed and rather startled him.

"The man appeared at first to be thoroughly discomfited, almost to be afraid. Then he covered this up, or at least appeared to do so, by a show of annoyance. He announced that he hadn't the slightest idea where he had got the matches, that he had scarcely noticed any peculiarity about them. He finished up by remarking rather unpleasantly to the hotel at large that certain people in this world seemed to be very amply blessed with curiosity. Then he hurried out of the hotel, which he had been doing when my friend had stopped him to ask his innocent question.

"My informant was not unnaturally a little put out. He went straight to the *concierge* and asked the name of this man who had been so unnecessarily rude. He was told that the fellow was Daly, the American millionaire."

Dubonnet stopped and looked round his small audience as if to see what impression he had made by the revelation of the name. But, although both Victor Caryll and Bill Wilson were very serious, neither made any sign.

After a moment the little Frenchman continued:

"My informant then told me that beyond regretting inwardly that such discourtesy should come from a compatriot of his, he thought no more on the matter, determining only to go out on the following morning

and search round the shops for some matches similar to the one he had seen. He returned to the lounge of the hotel and sat down to wait for his wife, who was upstairs in her room changing for dinner. To while away the time, he picked up an evening paper, and being able to read French, started to peruse it. Almost at once his eyes found a virulent attack on us of the Sûreté for having failed to solve the mystery of the two girls who had vanished and the arch-criminal who called himself the Obedient Servant. All the details of the case were given, but my friend's interest remained but slight until he came to a certain paragraph which described the leader of this gang as peculiarly addicted to the colour green, and which cited in support of this statement the notepaper which he always used.

"At once a vision of the startled expression on the face of the man Daly when asked a perfectly innocent question came before my informant's eyes. He decided that although there was probably nothing in the thing beyond coincidence, yet it was his duty to visit me and lay the matter before me, which he did at the very first opportunity."

Dubonnet paused again, this time without looking up.

"Well, my friends," he went on suddenly, "nothing is so small in matters such as these that it can be overlooked. And you must remember that this was not the first time that Daly had been mixed up in the affair. It was his daughter—mademoiselle waiting in the next room for us to finish—who was the first victim of the Obedient Servant, as I still prefer to call him. He was

the man who paid the ransom at once—so surprisingly quickly that I now realise I should perhaps have been suspicious. Americans do not usually take such things without at least making a fight for it. I determined that a little investigation into the past of this man might prove very well worth the trouble."

Dubonnet picked up an envelope lying on the desk in front of him.

"The answer, gentlemen, is in this envelope."

Vic had said no word during the little Frenchman's revelation, nor had he shown by as much as the flicker of an eyelid that he was in any way affected. But that, he well knew, Dubonnet understood for what it really was—just the usual impassivity which was characteristic of him. He understood full well now why the head of the Sûreté had insisted on Patricia retiring to that other room and not being present at the interview, and he understood as well that it had not been entirely for her sake, but also partly for his. Although it cost him an effort of will to do so, he caught and held Dubonnet's glance and smiled.

"Open it," he said.

Dubonnet tore open the envelope, and withdrew its contents. He glanced at it first, and then looked up.

"I shall read it to you," he said rather abruptly. "Listen: 'Our information of the man Daly is slight. He is not a public character in any sense of the word, in spite of the fact that he certainly has money and spends it freely; but he does not welcome publicity. He is apt to frequent places of doubtful reputation, and is apparently friendly with certain suspicious charac-

ters, in many cases gaol-birds. Supposed to have lost heavily on Wall Street just before starting his European trip.' "

Vic laughed shortly.

"The cap appears to fit," he remarked.

There was a long silence. All three were busy with their thoughts, but it was Vic who first summoned up the necessary determination to put them into words.

"Now look here, Dubonnet," he said, and his voice was firm. "As I understand the situation, the man Daly is almost certainly a member of this gang we have been chasing. For the purposes of argument, let us assume that this is a proved fact. Anyway, I shall tell you something in a minute which goes to confirm it, but I want to be quite clear about another thing before I do. How does Miss Daly stand in this little matter?"

Dubonnet laughed.

"You will excuse me, *cher camarade,* if I say that this is a question which I have been expecting to be asked."

The rotund little man stood up behind his desk, his face now wearing a perfectly serious expression.

"France, messieurs, does not forget those who render her a service. Mademoiselle Daly has rendered her a service, by making it possible to release two of her daughters from a vile imprisonment. There are two ways of looking at the case of Mademoiselle Daly; the first that she was a willing accomplice of her father by adoption in his plot with this man Sinclair, and the second, and far more probable, supposition that she was but an unwilling tool of these unscrupulous

men. France will judge her from the second point of view."

He sat down again.

It was all that Vic could do to suppress a violent desire to laugh at the melodramatic little scene. But he well knew that to laugh would be to offend the great-hearted little Frenchman mortally. For another reason also he wished to laugh, almost to cheer. It mattered not one jot to him what suspicious minds might think of his beloved Pat; he himself felt that whatever she might have done in the past, all that now was finished with in the joy of their mutual discovery—that they belonged the one to the other. In any case, he was not prepared to admit even to himself that Patricia could have been anything but a helpless tool in the hands of vile rogues, unable to control her actions except after she had found out the villiany of those who were directing her movements. Thus the conclusions to which his love for her had bade him come were in reality not so very wide of the truth.

"I don't quite understand," suddenly remarked Bill, who had hitherto been silent, "how Miss Daly can have been an accomplice, since she herself was held by Sinclair until the ransom was paid?"

"That is not an insuperable difficulty, old bird. What probably happened was that she was ransomed only as an example to the parents of the other abducted girls."

Dubonnet nodded.

"I agree," he said. "But, *mon cher,* you were saying a moment ago that as soon as a certain matter was

clear to you, you would tell me of something which might confirm us in our opinion of Daly. I hope I have settled the other matter to your satisfaction. Will you tell me now?"

"Of course!" Caryll laughed. "I had forgotten, old chap. I can distinctly remember, when I was bound up so prettily and you were still sleeping away the effects of that delightful gas, an impression which came to me when Pat—I mean Miss Daly—made her first appearance in that little room off the main hall. It was a moment of intense astonishment to us all, of course. I think that she was about the last person that any of us expected to see. But the man who was more surprised than any of us was that other green-hooded johnny, not Sinclair, but his second-in-command, so to speak. It was just a momentary impression, but it seemed to me that that man suffered something in the nature of a rude shock; just the sort of shock, in fact, that Daly might have got at the unexpected sight of Patricia. I know it's nothing, but it—well, it adds another link, doesn't it?"

"Good Lord!"

Vic laughed.

"Why so astonished, Bill?"

"That bounder! Think of Patricia in that man's clutches all the time."

"I'd rather not," said Vic grimly. "That is a thing I shall only remember when I meet the blighter face to face. But then it will be vivid in the forefront of my mind. Dubonnet, old turnip, what about going and rooting him out of the Ritz? He may be there, but, if

he isn't, then he'll find it pretty hard to establish an alibi, and you'll have something to hold him on, anyway, pending further inquiries."

Dubonnet smiled.

"I shall not keep you waiting long," he said; "but you must excuse me if I do not tell you what we are waiting for. Trust me that it is of importance, otherwise I should be the very first to be at the Ritz. You will not now be kept very much longer."

The telephone bell rang sharply. Dubonnet picked up the instrument from his desk. He spoke in French, and so rapidly that neither Vic nor Bill Wilson could follow the conversation. He did not talk for long, however, but slowly replaced the receiver.

"That was my subordinate at the Rue Picot. The fire is now almost out, and he has investigated. It is as I thought; the place must have been specially built, probably by someone with money acting on behalf of your friend Sinclair."

"Daly!"

The name came simultaneously from both Vic and Bill.

"We must not jump to conclusions," said the little Frenchman soberly. "It would never do to arraign an innocent man on such a serious charge without complete proof. But, to use your own expression, *mon cher,* the chap seems to fit, better and better every moment!"

He paused, and smiled to the two Englishmen. Vic did not doubt that in his own mind Dubonnet had already convicted Daly. The weight of evidence, even

though only circumstantial, was steadily increasing against him.

"Did they get any of the gang?"

"I am sorry to say that they all seem to have got away. The tunnel has been explored, and leads to the cellar of a house in an adjoining street. This house was found to be empty. I have given instructions that every exit of Paris is to be closely watched, and, as an added precaution, just in case they should slip through our fingers here, all the frontiers and seaports will be carefully watched. They may yet get away, but they will find it a very difficult matter."

There was a silence for a moment after this. Then Vic, unable further to curb his impatience, hazarded the question:

"I say, old man, are we waiting for anything else?"

Dubonnet laughed.

"Have just a little more patience, my friend. Evidently they are finding it difficult to make him talk."

"To make him talk? Whom?"

Dubonnet laughed again, and in his laugh there seemed to Vic to be just a touch of sarcasm.

"I am well aware," he said, "that you Englishmen do not always approve of our methods here in France with a—well, a difficult witness. It is a matter of opinion, a matter of the custom of the country. This I wish to point out very strongly—that public opinion in my country is as strong as it is in yours, and no secret is made of our way of doing things. It is, shall we say, the way one is brought up. But not so long ago, *mon ami,* you gave me a very clear insight into the way you

looked at it. Therefore I decided to spare you both what is merely an incident, but which you might have regarded from a different point of view.

"The man who is at present being interrogated in another room in this building is the architect of that new block of flats in the Rue Picot under which you, Monsieur Caryll, and mademoiselle next door discovered the headquarters of the gang. One does not find lifts and great hidden rooms, with only two exits, and both of them secret, in a large new building unless they have been put there on purpose. Obviously it was not a question of converting what was already there. We may assume that much, because in the first place the building was only erected last year, and, secondly, it is clear that there never has been any exit from the place except by the secret door leading from the lift to the flat occupied by Madame Sinclair, or the hidden tunnel leading to the house which I have no doubt was kept untenanted on purpose. Therefore, obviously, I am interested in what the architect has to tell me on the matter."

Vic turned to Bill Wilson:

"Of course," he said, "you can tell it by merely glancing at the man. The high forehead, the intelligent eyes. But I think he has excelled himself here, don't you?"

"Carried with no dissentient!"

Victor Caryll turned to Dubonnet.

"Accept my sincere felicitations, my brave. The architect johnny should certainly have something of interest to tell us. The deductive reasoning which led

you to him was a first cousin to a brain wave all the same. Receive, dear sir, my salutations the most distinguished."

Dubonnet beamed with delight.

"We should hear what he has said any minute now," he remarked in a satisfied tone of voice. Evidently the little man harboured no doubt as to the capacity of his satellites to extract all that was required of him from the luckless architect.

At that moment there came a knock at the door.

"Ah!" said Dubonnet. Then: "Come in."

A uniformed inspector entered the room. He advanced to the desk and laid a typewritten sheet upon it in front of his chief. A short conversation ensued, and was followed by the withdrawal of the inspector.

For a few moments Dubonnet said no word, but remained engrossed in the paper which had been brought to him. These were anxious minutes for Vic, curbing his impatience as best he could, longing to get up and look over the little Frenchman's shoulder. At last, however, Dubonnet finished his perusal and looked up with a smile.

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting," he said. "Well, we have made our first arrest. Leblanc, the architect, is at present in the cells below. Listen to what he has said: 'Nearly two years ago I got into very serious debt. I was approached about this time with the offer of doing the Rue Picot block of flats, and I was offered an enormous fee if I made two plans, very similar plans, one to be approved of by the authorities and the other actually to be carried out. The

difference in these plans consisted in the secret rooms in which you found the two girls. The building was done in such a way that I do not believe anyone, not even the workmen on the job, knew what was happening. I was paid my money, and was able to clear myself of my debts and keep a good deal more. I am sorry, but the temptation was more than I could withstand, and I had no idea for what purpose I was being used. The man who paid me my money was the American millionaire Daly.' "

"Up and at him, don't you think, old bean, bird, or broncho?" Vic laughed mirthlessly. "That joker Daly would make an attractive addition to our collection down below."

He stood up as he spoke, and Bill Wilson followed his example. Dubonnet remained seated for a moment longer.

"Perhaps you would like to tell mademoiselle," he suggested, "that we shall be back shortly, and that in the meantime I should feel honoured if she would accept the hospitality of the room next door until we return?"

Vic smiled gratefully at the kind-hearted little man, and moved over to the communicating door.

"Sha'n't be a moment, chaps," he said.

He vanished through the door. A second later he was back in the room, and all the colour had left his face.

"Is there any means of overhearing what we have been saying from that room?"

His voice, usually light and care-free, had taken

on a new tone, a strange tone. His question was not a question: it was a demand for information. His expression, usually humorous, contained no spark of humour.

"Sapristi!"

Dubonnet leapt to his feet. In a trice he had passed Vic and had looked into the adjoining room. He turned:

"She has gone!"

Vic turned on him irritably.

"Damn it, man, I know that! But what made her go? Can she have heard, that's what I want to know. Does she know about her adopted father?"

Dubonnet pointed to the table in the other room.

"The head 'phones," he said simply. "That is my secretary's room. It is occasionally essential that he should take down in shorthand certain interviews which I have in here. Oh, what a fool I am!"

There was something almost pathetic about the very genuine distress of the little man. Vic's voice, when he spoke, was kind:

"The mistake has been made, and it can't be undone. We mustn't sing a dirge over it, old man. Well, we'd better be getting along after Daly, hadn't we?"

It was in that moment perhaps that Victor Caryll rose to his greatest height, for in those words lay the complete suppression of self in the interests of duty. After his work was finished, but not one moment before, would he consider himself free to find his beloved and claim her as his own.

CHAPTER XXVI

VIC'S brain was in a turmoil as he followed Dubonnet and Wilson down the stairs and into the street, where a police car was waiting for them. Through the mist of bewilderment there remained only the one salient fact from which he could not get away: Patricia, from whom he had thought never again to be separated, had gone, disappeared into thin air just as he had thought her his for life. Upstairs in Dubonnet's room at the Sûreté, he had spoken bravely; but he was very far from feeling an equal quantity of mental courage. Never before had he realised just how much she meant to him.

A fairly clear explanation of her motives in this sudden flight drummed itself into his brain. It did not require very great deductive abilities to understand that, since she had almost certainly overheard every single word spoken in the room next to her, she had grasped the very great danger in which her father by adoption now stood; and it was possible that she had felt in duty bound to go and find him, and then warn him. This theory, Vic felt, was the right one, especially as it presupposed the fact that Patricia had not previously known of any liaison between the criminal known as the Obedient Servant and Daly, and that the information she had overheard had come to her out of the blue and as a great shock. Otherwise, aware all the time of the part played by Daly in the whole affair,

she would scarcely have bothered to go off to warn him, just at a time when her own future was as rosy as she could possibly wish. That Patricia might conceivably be running away from him never even entered Vic's head.

The only other possible supposition—that all the time Patricia was in league with Sinclair, a member of his gang and used by him as a spy—Vic found too fantastic to believe for a minute. In order to believe in her he did not require to remind himself of the part she had already played in the events of that hectic night. Any thought, any theory in any way derogatory to her, he thrust from his mind as if it were some heinous thing, some leprous disloyalty.

But, even though he felt fairly confident that he had now arrived at the reason for her sudden and totally unexpected disappearance, his thoughts were not one whit more pleasant. Victor Caryll prided himself with justice on his ability to judge character. It seemed to him that having made up her mind that loyalty demanded of her that she should go and warn the man who had been kind to her in the past, Patricia might well feel that by so doing she was forfeiting his friendship, perhaps his love. And if she did come to this conclusion, then, having accomplished her design, she would probably shut out from her mind the recollection of all that had passed between them on that night, and perhaps return to Daly, escape with him and return to her life of bondage as his adopted daughter. The thought that this might happen, and that he could do nothing to prevent it, seemed to cut right down into Vic's very soul.

He now understood, and with the understanding, perhaps for the first time, fully sensed the extent of his loss—that Patricia would never return to him. Were he ever to see her again he would have to seek her out in the haystack of the world, and claim her before it was too late; before circumstances and the winds of chance between them had buffeted the resistance of her frail memory of those all too few sweet moments from her heart.

Then it was that Victor Caryll took an oath. He swore to himself solemnly that just as soon as he could no more be of use to the Paris Sûreté, at the very first moment that he was free, he would start on a chase which meant far more to him than any of his previous pursuits after criminals. He would find Patricia Daly, find her and then take her, even if he lost all else in the attempt.

"Even if we fail to find Daly, we may be able to pick up the trail of Sinclair's wife, and she may unwittingly lead us to the man we really want."

Dubonnet's voice speaking to Wilson came to Caryll out of the haze of his thoughts.

"Great Scott!"

The exclamation escaped Vic involuntarily. A second later he was leaning out of the window and giving fresh instructions to the chauffeur. Then he turned to Dubonnet:

"I'm terribly sorry, old fellow! My brain seems to have become a bit clogged. I've just remembered that I overheard Derek Sinclair tell his wife and that other green-hooded blighter to go and wait for him at the restaurant Fouquet. I've told the driver to go there.

We're almost certainly too late, but it seems worth while having a shot, anyway."

"Well worth while. I wish you had remembered that before."

Dubonnet said the words a trifle coldly, and Caryll accepted the rebuff in silence. He rather agreed with the little Frenchman, and felt that some rebuke was justified.

In response to Vic's instructions, the driver had altered his direction and was now rushing up the Champs Élysées towards the restaurant Fouquet. It did not take them long to reach its doors.

Dubonnet was the first out of the car, and he rapidly gave instructions to the two uniformed officers who had accompanied them. While he was engaged in this necessary task, Vic and Bill Wilson crossed the intervening space and glanced in at the doors.

"D'you see her, Vic?"

"No."

There were few people left in the place, which was not surprising in view of the lateness of the hour. But from their position the two friends could not see every corner of the room.

"We'd better wait for Dubonnet before going in," said Vic. "We don't want to give the alarm before the men outside are ready."

For a few moments they waited in silence. Then suddenly Bill Wilson laughed.

Vic looked at him sharply, a questioning glance.

"D'you think they'll prosecute Anne if they get her, Vic?"

"I don't know, and I can't say I care very much either. Why?"

"For no particular reason. Only I can't help being amused at the thought that we are now actually chasing a girl we did our best to protect not so very long ago."

It was true, and Vic realised it on the instant. But with it he saw also the change that had taken place in the girl wife of the arch-criminal Sinclair. When he had first known her Anne had been a sweet-charactered girl; now he knew her to be as unscrupulous as her fiend of a husband. A shudder took possession of his frame. If in one case the proximity of criminal society could wreak such an appalling change, and in so short a time, then might it not happen once again? Hard as he tried, Vic could not rid himself of a vision of Patricia Daly's face, lovely as it was now, and then hardened and coarsened as it might so easily become if he failed to find her; if he failed to find her in time. But to Vic such a possibility was abhorrent and could not even be considered.

Dubonnet joined them at the door, and the trio entered the restaurant. A quick glance round satisfied Vic that the quarry was not there. Dubonnet found the manager.

"Are there any parties going on in private rooms?" he asked, having made himself known.

"None, monsieur."

"Everyone on the premises is here in this room now?"

"Everyone, monsieur."

"Do you remember a customer coming to-night who answers to this description?"

Briefly Dubonnet gave a description of the man Daly. When he had finished, the manager shook his head dolefully.

"I wish I could help you, Monsieur Dubonnet," he said. "But we have so many customers. It is difficult, almost impossible, to remember everyone who comes, unless he is an old and valued guest of the house. The only man to whom the description might apply is obviously not the man you are looking for, since it is Monsieur Daly, the American millionaire."

"Has he been here to-night?"

Dubonnet almost barked the question.

"Yes. He was here with a lady."

Dubonnet turned round and looked at Vic, who understood at once what was required of him. Very concisely he gave an accurate description of Anne Sinclair as she was now. Almost before he had finished the restaurant manager was blurting out:

"Yes! Yes! That was the lady!"

Vic smiled to Dubonnet.

"Even though our birds have flown I'm glad we came here," he said. "The chain of evidence is just about complete now against Daly. I am satisfied anyway that the second green-hooded lad and this so-called millionaire are one and the same person."

"And so am I," answered the little Frenchman. Then, turning to the waiting manager, he asked:

"When did they leave?"

"About an hour ago, monsieur. A friend of Mon-

sieur Daly's came in, and all three left in rather a hurry. Monsieur Daly looked worried; at least I think he was, because, contrary to his usual custom, he only signed the bill, and did not pay in cash."

Dubonnet laughed.

"I shall take possession of that bill," he said. "As a matter of fact I think I can promise you that your only chance of ever getting it paid lies in me. Get it for me quickly; I also am in a hurry."

The astonished and rather horrified manager bustled off to do as he was bid, while Dubonnet turned to the two Englishmen.

"My friends," he said, "I am in great hopes. If those three were still in Paris an hour ago, then they will find that to leave the city they will have to pass through a very fine comb. I cannot be sure, but I think, I hope, that they will not succeed!"

The manager returned with a slip of paper in his hand. This Dubonnet put into his pocket-book.

"En avant, camarades!"

He left the restaurant, closely followed by Bill Wilson, but Vic lingered behind for a moment.

"That friend of Daly's who came and took him away so suddenly, was it a man or a woman?"

The manager did not hesitate.

"A man, monsieur. I should say from his clothes that he was a countryman of yours."

"Thank you," said Vic.

He followed the others at once, and had caught them up by the time that they reached the car; and, as he entered after them, he was smiling to himself.

To Vic and to Dubonnet, engrossed in their thoughts

and the possibilities of the immediate future, the drive from Fouquet's to the Ritz probably appeared to take some time. But to Bill Wilson it was little else but a nightmare. Paris, almost all through the night, retains a larger measure of its daytime traffic than possibly any other capital of Europe. The driver of the car was manifestly an expert and accustomed to picking his way through traffic at a high speed, but even so the rate at which they were travelling almost took Bill's breath away. He was profoundly thankful when, after a great sweep, the car drew up in the Place Vendôme opposite the doors of the Ritz.

Dubonnet at once asked for the manager, and insisted upon his being produced immediately. There were a few minutes' delay while the rather scared night porter went to summon his chief. At last, however, the man appeared, rather scantily clothed and inclined at first to be somewhat disgruntled.

His demeanour changed entirely when he recognised Dubonnet as one of his visitors. He ushered them into his office, and at once inquired in what way he could be of assistance.

Dubonnet, in as short a time as possible, acquainted him with all the facts. He concluded by asking if Daly were at the moment in his room.

"Officially, yes, monsieur. But from what you have told me, I very much doubt whether we shall find him there. He has a suite of rooms, looking out on to the Place Vendôme. Shall we go up and see?"

"Have you a master key?"

"But of course."

"Give it to me."

"But I shall come with you."

Dubonnet laughed.

"I admire your spirit, *mon ami.* But, if he is there, we may expect resistance. I shall be the first to enter, since I have a message for him—from this."

As he said the words, Dubonnet showed a glimpse of the vicious little automatic which he always carried.

The hotel manager led the way to the suite, but there gave pride of place to the chief of the Sûreté. Almost in one movement Dubonnet inserted the key and threw open the door. His pistol held in readiness, he darted into the room.

A scene of almost indescribable confusion met his eyes. Boxes and suit-cases lay open everywhere, pieces of clothing were scattered all over the floor. A chair, looking rather grotesque, was lying overturned in one corner.

The little Frenchman turned to Vic, who had followed him into the room.

"We are too late," he said, with a rueful smile.

"There are other rooms." The manager was bustling around them in his eagerness. "The sitting-room opposite; the two bedrooms through there."

Dubonnet at once advanced towards the sitting-room door, which was closed. Vic, after a momentary hesitation, turned to his right and entered the first of the bedrooms.

It was empty, and in much the same state of confusion as the dining-room which he had just left. The few odds and ends which had been left were obviously masculine, and Vic walked straight through to the door opposite. This he found to be locked.

At that moment Vic thanked his Maker for the great physical strength which was his. He put his shoulder against the wooden panel, and exerted a great pressure. He felt it giving slightly, and redoubled his efforts.

The door gave suddenly, and Vic stumbled into the room. Almost at once he recovered his equilibrium, and looked around him.

This obviously had been Patricia's room, but it was empty. Moreover, it betrayed the same signs of hurried departure as had been noticeable in the other rooms. An envelope on the dressing-table attracted his attention.

An awful feeling of presentiment all but overcame Victor Caryll. He knew at once, by some means which he would have been at a loss to explain, that in that envelope there was concealed a letter for him from his beloved. But he scarcely dared take the few strides forward to make certain. Something seemed to tell him that in that letter lay the doom of all his hopes.

Suddenly mastering himself, he almost ran to the dressing-table and snatched up the envelope. In handwriting, obviously feminine, he saw his own name.

For a short space of time Victor Caryll, born leader of men, stood stock-still, almost transfixed. Then he quietly put the envelope in his pocket.

"Steady, old son," he said to himself, "there's work to be done still, old bird. And you've *got to carry on until you've finished it!*"

CHAPTER XXVII

PATRICIA let the head 'phones drop with a crash on to the table through her nerveless fingers. Many little things had previously made her doubtful as to the part played in the affair by the man she was accustomed to call her father, but that this revelation which she had just overheard could be true she found very hard to believe. Yet Dubonnet had said so, and the Sûreté did not make many mistakes. . . .

Wearily she passed her stone-cold hand across her aching forehead and sank back in her chair. The strain was beginning to tell, and badly. The part which she had played in the hectic events of that awful night would have been more than sufficient to tax the strength to its uttermost of a far stronger woman than she. Patricia, frail, almost fragile in her loveliness, sat huddled in her chair not unlike some wilted flower.

Suddenly she sat upright. That courage, the indomitable spirit which was hers and which had carried her already so far on this never-to-be-forgotten night, had returned; once more she was herself.

"Now then, Pat," she encouraged herself, "now then, my girl, don't go chucking it up yet!"

She reviewed the situation as presented to her by those words of Dubonnet's which the communicating telephone had made it possible for her to hear. In-

formation had been given against Daly by another American, a man who had seen him use a green match. At once there flew to the fore-front of her mind the fact that she knew Daly to have access to the green notepaper affected by the Obedient Servant. She remembered that letter which, although she knew it to be false, she had taken to Victor Caryll's hotel with a story made up for her by Daly himself. A little frown overspread her forehead at this unpleasant recollection, a small sigh escaped her. She wondered whether, had she already known Vic then, she would have followed Daly's orders so blindly. She remembered also—and the recollection shook her slightly—the obvious uneasiness with which Daly had received the information concerning that green signet ring, which she had thought trivial, and which she had told the two Englishmen.

Now that she could tabulate all these incidents, and look at them dispassionately in the light of Dubonnet's revelation which she had just heard, Patricia realised that she had been slow to gather the inferences. But before this latest knowledge of the fact that Daly was suspected of collaboration in the evil machinations of the self-styled Obedient Servant, the possibility had never entered her head. The very fact that she herself had been kidnapped and held to ransom, a ransom which, she had always supposed, had been paid, had precluded any chance of arousing her suspicion. As well, on her return Daly had appeared to be genuinely delighted and genuinely furious at her abduction.

Patricia understood now only too well the extent to which she had been duped, but she was rather surprised to find that she bore very little resentment. Be-

yond the fact that she had been made an unwilling accomplice of a man who was a murderer, she could not find it in her heart to be too angry with her father by adoption. She could not forget that he had taken her direct from a police court, a woman convicted of a stupid petty felony, and given her everything that she could desire over a period of two years. Something had been expected of her in return, but it had not been that something which might have been expected from a man of Daly's type. Always her honour had been respected, except for a few small deviations from the truth which she was expected to back up on his behalf and one recent incident for which he had already apologised. That letter, and the accompanying story, she realised now to have been by far her greatest test. And with this understanding came comprehension of the object of the letter. Evidently she had been made use of in an attempt to abduct Victor Caryll himself —capture him for almost certain death!

She shook off these unpleasant retrospective thoughts with an effort which was physical. Patricia understood now almost too clearly that Dubonnet was certainly right in his suspicions. On one point only did she disagree with him; she did not believe that other wearer of the green silk hood could have been the man who had been good to her. He had been in evening dress; she had seen John Daly leave the suite dressed in his day clothes. She had heard him speak; the voice had not been Daly's.

Therefore he was almost certainly now at the Ritz, in bed, quite unaware of the grave danger in which he stood. The police would go there, would find him, would

drag him off to a long imprisonment, perhaps worse!

Suddenly a vision of a certain incident, an event which she had often tried to forget, came before her eyes. She saw again that police court in New York, she saw herself in the box, desperate, defiant. She heard the judge's words, calling her a pest to Society, a danger to her fellows. She heard the sentence, unusually harsh, almost felt again the awful sensation of hopelessness, of helpless, hapless impotence as the wardress led her away, as it had seemed right into the bowels of the earth. Disappointment, too, in life. And then had come John Daly with a new chance, with fresh hope.

Patricia felt in that moment that no matter what he had done, no matter at what cost to her, she could not let him sleep to his doom.

She was under no illusions as to the price which would be exacted from her. Now, to pay back her debt to Daly, she would have to be disloyal to Vic; she would have to take a definite step against him. She could not expect him fully to comprehend her motives; she could not expect him, who had never experienced just such a terrible situation, to understand that if, in his great need, she failed this man she had known as a father, the reproach would haunt her all her life. Vic, with his sense of duty, would, she thought, see only the criminal in Daly. It never occurred to her that a sense of duty is in reality nothing very much more than a sense of loyalty.

The girl stood up to her full height.

"Pat," she said, half aloud, "this is going to kill you. But come on; let's get it over."

She picked up the head 'phones and again pressed

them to her ears just for one moment. She did this partly to make sure that the men in the next room were still busy with their conference, partly out of a moment of weakness in the hope of hearing Vic's voice just once more.

"Good-bye, Vic, my dear!" she whispered.

Then she turned to the second door of the room.

She found herself in a passage which she instantly recognised as the one by which she and the others had reached Dubonnet's room. It took her only a moment to reach the head of the stairs, and these she descended. She passed two uniformed policemen on the way out, but beyond a curious glance they paid no particular attention to her.

She reached the front door leading to the street. Here there was a sentry, a difficulty which she had not foreseen. She walked bravely up to him, past him, and out into the street. She breathed a sigh of relief. He had touched his kepi as she passed, evidently recognising in her the lady who had entered some time previously with Dubonnet.

She was lucky to find a taxi fairly soon, and she instructed the driver to take her to the Ritz. In a very few moments she was ascending the main staircase to the suite.

As she approached the door she saw a light in the crack under it. She tried the handle, but found it locked. She knocked.

The light was instantly extinguished. There came no answer.

She knocked again. Still there came no answer. She called out, saying who she was.

She heard the sound of bolts being withdrawn. Then the door was abruptly opened, a hand seized her arm and pulled her roughly into the room. She heard the door being closed rapidly.

Patricia could not restrain a little cry. Another hand was thrust over her mouth. A voice which she recognised as that of Daly whispered to her to be quiet. The room was still in complete darkness.

Patricia allowed herself to be guided across the room and pushed into a chair. She sensed rather than heard John Daly leave her. A second later and the room was flooded by the electric light.

She found herself staring into the barrel of a revolver. The hand that held it was John Daly's, and he was clothed in evening dress.

Patricia cowered back in her chair, not so much from the menace of the pistol as from the expression in the man's face and eyes. Daly was obviously mad with fear, even though but temporarily. Gone entirely was his usual urbane self, and it had been replaced by a creature in whom the girl recognised no trace of his old qualities.

But it was not only the pistol and the ghastly change in the man himself which hypnotised her. She could not take her eyes from the dinner-jacket suit which he was wearing. Was it possible that Dubonnet was right, and that there stood in front of her now the other wearer of those horrible green hoods?

"So you failed to take my advice? Your blasted curiosity got the better of you, eh? Well, on whose side are you now?"

Daly's voice also had changed. There was none of that gentleness with which he habitually addressed her; his tone was bullying, quite brutal.

Patricia deliberately blinded her eyes to the knowledge which his question implied. She fell back on the fact that she had heard that other man speak and the voice had not been Daly's. She still refused to believe that this man who had once saved her, and whom she had learnt to know so well, could consort with and be the associate of a murderer. She was about to answer when, suddenly the telephone bell rang.

The effect on Daly was horrifying. He swung round and swore savagely at the instrument. Then, with an abruptness which made the watching girl jump, he threw the revolver on to the table and felt in his waistcoat pocket.

Patricia watched him, but as she did so her heart sank within her. She sensed that now she was to receive the final blow, to have the fact which she so much wished to disbelieve proved beyond all shadow of doubt. She could not take her eyes off the man's movements, much as she longed to do so.

Daly withdrew his hand from his pocket. Patricia, watching closely, noticed that his expression had changed. There was something much more normal about him now as he removed the receiver from its hook. This he had evidently done to prevent the noise of the bell, for he was not ready yet to answer it. He placed it on the table by his side.

Turning once more to Patricia, he spoke to her again in his usual suave voice.

"You should note this little trick, my dear," he said. "After all, one never knows when these things may come in useful. If you ever go on the stage, for instance, you may require to alter your voice. By making use of these two small pieces of rubber, one in each cheek, the matter, otherwise difficult, is made easy. They are known in Thespian circles as 'plumpers.' "

He inserted the two pieces of rubber, in shape rather like the two halves of a fig, into his mouth. Then he lifted the telephone.

"Hullo?"

Patricia could have screamed. There could no longer be any doubt, for the voice which she heard was the voice of the man who had appeared to be Sinclair's second-in-command. A feeling of acute nausea all but overcame her. It seemed to her that the voice speaking into the instrument came from a great distance.

"Hullo? Oh, yes. Yes."

There was a pause. Daly was listening intently.

"Right."

He hung up the receiver, and replaced the instrument on the table. Then, turning, he withdrew his handkerchief from his pocket and passed it across his forehead.

"Whew!" he remarked, "that gave me quite a shock. It was only my friend Sinclair, however. What a marvellous man that is! I have never known him unprepared in any emergency. An aeroplane will land in the Bois de Boulogne in exactly one hour. But only for a minute. Then it will rise again, with three passengers, Old Sinclair himself, his wife, and little me!"

Patricia noticed that the prospect of an early escape

had quite altered the man standing before her. Now he was inclined to treat the affair with a certain amount of levity, whereas a few moments before he had been in a state bordering on frenzy. She did not know in which mood she hated him the more.

She herself was far from feeling any such levity. She now grasped the fact that her great renunciation had been made in vain. A mad idea almost overwhelmed her—to rush blindly from the room back to the Sûreté and feign that she had never left it. But she saw only too clearly a second later that she was much too late for this. Her disappearance must have been discovered ere now, and the worst construction put upon it. She understood, in a moment of clarity, that she was herself probably as much hunted at that very moment as the man opposite her in that room. A feeling akin to despair began to take possession of her.

Suddenly John Daly's voice cut into her thoughts:

"Well, my dear, and I suppose your friend Victor Caryll will—will, shall we say, look after you?"

The vile insinuation failed to make any impression on Patricia. She felt beyond resentment now; she felt only a terrible weariness both of body and of mind.

"I've done with him," she answered tonelessly.

"Done with him?"

"Yes."

For a moment Daly hesitated. From what he had seen of Patricia's movements of that night, from what he knew of Victor Caryll's character, he failed utterly to understand the situation. Then he put the question almost brutally in its directness:

"Why?"

"Why?" Patricia seemed tired, almost bored. "Must you know?"

"Legally," said Daly sharply, "I am your father. That doesn't bear much weight with me, as I daresay you'll guess. But I happen to be fond of you, Patricia. Hurry up and tell me; I've got to be in the Bois in less than an hour."

Patricia looked up at the man standing before her. Somehow he seemed to have aged in the last few minutes: there was an indescribable air of sadness, of sympathy in his eyes. He sat on the arm of her chair and took her hand in his.

"Tell me. You can trust me, really."

She told him. She did her best to explain why she could not go back to Vic now, after having done her best to make him fail, even though her efforts had been useless. She told him the whole unvarnished truth.

For a long moment, after she had finished, they remained sitting in silence. Then John Daly got up rather nervously.

"We'll get away together," he said shortly. "No need to let Sinclair know. If I'm not there at the right time they won't wait for me. We'll just take our chance of getting out of France by the ordinary means."

Patricia looked at him. She made up her mind that he was in earnest, that he meant every word that he had said. She felt a little touched that this man should be willing to risk his liberty, perhaps even his life, in order to prevent her being left alone to fend for herself in a cruel world. But she knew that his only chance lay with Sinclair and his aeroplane.

"We'd never get away," she said quickly. "You must go in the aeroplane."

"Won't you come with me?"

His voice was appealing, and Patricia wavered. There seemed nothing else left open to her, nothing else that she could do. She felt also that now she really didn't care very much what happened to her, now that she had lost irretrievably all that was dear to her.

Daly leant over and kissed her cheek.

Instantly another vision rose up in front of her eyes. She saw again that expression, almost bestial in nature, which John Daly had worn earlier that evening. She remembered what it was that had caused him to promise her a present from Cartier's for the following morning to pacify her outraged feelings. She understood, for the first time, but no less vividly for that, that their relationship of the past two years could not continue. Were she to go with him now, it would have to be either as his mistress or his wife.

She knew that she could never be his wife.

Patricia jumped from her chair.

"You must hurry!" she cried. "I'll help you to pack up. What are you taking?"

"You won't come too?"

"No."

"I'd treat you well, Pat."

"I know you would. But I'm not coming. Quick! What do you want to take?"

Then started a few hectic minutes. No further word was spoken by either on the subject. Daly understood,

at least partially, the real reason for her refusal, and in a curious and warped way he appreciated it. They threw a few necessaries into a small handbag, and he added a small wallet containing papers.

Then, closing the bag, he turned towards her.

"Patricia," he said slowly, "I promised you a present from Cartier's. I sha'n't be here to give it to you. But here's the money, anyway. You'll need it."

He handed her a bundle of notes. Sheer necessity compelled her to accept the gift.

"Good-bye, my dear."

She held out her hand. He took it and raised it to his lips.

"I hope you will never need me, my dear," he said, "but the way of the world is hard. Keep straight, Pat, if you can. Take the advice of an old crook. I led myself astray too young to make a change afterwards. Good luck, Pat, little girl."

Seizing the bag in his right hand, he opened the door very cautiously. A moment later it had closed behind him.

Patricia wanted to cry out, to call him back. Never before had she felt such utter loneliness, such an awful sensation of despair. Tears—pitiable, unwanted tears which she could not suppress—formed at the back of her eyes and overflowed. She began to feel hysterical; she wanted to scream with all her might, and then to scream again. She wanted to laugh, to yell.

Then just as suddenly as it had come upon her the spasm passed. A more normal point of view came uppermost, and the power to think clearly returned to her. She dried her eyes, sat down again for just a

second's rest. This, she began to realise, she badly needed.

Suddenly, as she sat there, she saw clearly that she was wasting time, and again she jumped to her feet. She understood that if haste had been of importance to Daly, it was none the less so to her. She had allowed herself rather to forget that she was hunted no less than the man who had just left her, and that very shortly the police would perhaps raid the room in which she stood, were perhaps already on their way.

She looked around her. The room, that room in which she had partaken of so many meals with Daly, presented an aspect almost of desertion. In their hurried packing, she and Daly had strewn clothes all over the floor; a chair in the far corner had overturned. Patricia suddenly felt that this disorder was symbolic, that she was now surveying the wreck not only of her life with Daly, but also of her entire existence. The tears threatened to come back again.

Patricia bit her lip savagely.

"Gee, girl, you certainly are morbid. Get on with it, you stupid child. Get on with it! Clear out, before they come and get you!"

She turned suddenly and ran through the communicating doors, through Daly's room into her own. She locked the door behind her. She pulled open the hanging cupboard in the corner and, producing her suitcase, surveyed her dresses.

She knew that she could take with her only what would fit into that suit-case, for more she could not carry. She looked at all her dresses with sadness in her heart, for she knew that she must now take leave

of them. One only, an evening gown of a pale, shimmering gold, she had not in her heart to abandon, and she folded it carefully. For the rest, she bundled in two everyday dresses, and her personal belongings. All her jewellery she took, for she knew that in it and the notes she had received lay her capital.

Then, locking the case, she looked around her. Her room was now as disorderly as both the others. She smiled—a slow, sad smile. It seemed to her that she was looking at the panorama of her life.

She was about to pick up the case and leave when an idea came to her. She looked at the writing-table and saw paper and pen lying there. Swiftly she made up her mind, and seated herself.

"It will be the last time, Pat," she whispered to herself. "I swear to you I'll never try to get in touch with him again. But I needn't leave him without any idea of why I had to, need I?"

A quarter of an hour later she had finished. She read her letter over carefully, made an alteration here and there. She folded up the sheet and put it in an envelope, which she addressed. This she put on the dressing-table.

Patricia took out her handkerchief and dried her eyes. Then, a set expression on her face, she seized the suit-case. She opened the door and looked out along the corridor. There was no one in sight, no sound to be heard; the hotel was deep in slumber.

She turned for a moment to glance at the letter.

"Good-bye, Vic, my sweet," she whispered.

CHAPTER XXVIII

VIC, sitting on his bed in the privacy of his room in his hotel, read the letter over again. He knew it now almost by heart, and there were certain passages which already were indelibly engraved in his memory. Nevertheless he read it now for the last time before converting it to ashes.

"Vic, dearest," he read. *"Don't call me a forward hussy; I must call you dearest once before I die! I know you've never put it into words, but you were going to ask me to marry you, weren't you? And I would have accepted you, Vic, if I hadn't overheard. How I wish I'd never been sent to that room where I had the opportunity!*

"I heard Dubonnet talking about the man who has given me a home for the past two years, since I was convicted of a petty theft. You didn't know that, did you? I wonder if it would have made any difference if you had? To do you justice, Vic, I think you would have taken me for what I am, and not for what I was.

"I heard him saying things I couldn't believe, but you all seemed to, and I knew you'd go and get him. What manner of a girl should I have been if I had left him to his fate? I fled to warn him; I found that Dubonnet was right, but, Vic, you do see that that

made no difference, don't you? He has given me everything; I couldn't have left him when he needed me, could I? He has gone, and I don't think you will find him.

"But I can't return to you now, after this. I see that only too well. I'm going to try to cut out a life for myself, and it won't be my fault if I don't succeed. I had to write, to make you understand.

"I must stop now, my dear, or you will find me still here. That would never do, would it? Good luck, Vic.

"PATRICIA, *who loves you.*"

Slowly, very deliberately, Victor Caryll took a matchbox from his pocket and struck one of the matches. He applied the flame to one corner of the sheet of notepaper, and held it burning as long as he was able. Then he let the fragment drop into the grate.

"Do I understand, Patricia darling? I think I do. But nobody else is going to know about it, sweetheart. That's why I've destroyed your letter. They are dangerous things, letters. So easily lost or stolen. It's better burnt, I think. A petty theft, did you say? My dear, I've often stolen matches from my club!"

He yawned. The effects of his activities were beginning to make themselves felt. The strain of that hectic night, both physical and mental, had taken its toll out of his strength.

He looked at his wrist-watch, and saw that it was after four.

"In the absence of beer," he said, "I think I'd better have a little sleep. Otherwise I shan't be able to finish

this job quickly, and that I must do. Then—to find my Pat."

A moment or two later and Vic was fast asleep.

He awoke to find the sun high in the heavens and shining full on to his bed. An insistent ringing seemed to be coming from just beside him, and, still half asleep, he turned on to his side. The ringing continued.

Suddenly he came back to full consciousness with a jerk. He realised that it was the telephone beside him which had awakened him. He looked at his wrist-watch and saw that it was after ten.

"Damn!" he said shortly. "A bad case of over-sleeping, old toad."

He picked up the receiver.

"Yes?"

"Ah! That you, Monsieur Caryll?"

"Hullo, Dubonnet! Good-morning."

"None the worse for last night?"

"I'm as fit as a fiddle, thanks. And you?"

"In perfect health. Caryll, I have some news."

"Yes."

"It came from a little channel port in between Calais and Boulogne this morning. The wreckage of an aeroplane was sighted by a fishing-boat as soon as it was light, and the fishermen investigated. The machine was floating on the sea and appeared more or less intact. Either it was an engine breakdown or else the landing had been effected on purpose, but this seems unlikely, as the risk of a land machine coming down on the water is very great. The thing that interests us is that a suit-case was found in the cockpit of the machine."

"A suit-case?"

"Yes. In it were several very illuminating papers, and also some clothes. All these evidently belong to Sinclair."

"What!"

"That is how he made his escape, my friend. I have now discovered that an aeroplane scooped down in the Bois early this morning, more or less at the time that we were at the Ritz, stayed there for about a minute, and then rose again. That was probably the start. Clever, don't you think?"

"D'you think they crashed, then?"

"There seems no doubt about that. They are either at the bottom of the sea, *mon cher,* or they have got clean away out of the country. Anyway, this discovery, I think, closes the case as far as you are concerned. I thought I would ring you up and tell you, as I rather imagined you wanted to be free as soon as possible."

"Thank you so much, old friend."

There was a moment's pause. Vic began to wonder why Dubonnet did not ring off, when he suddenly heard his voice again.

"There is something else which I wish to tell you, Caryll. A certain lady—a lady whose welfare we are both interested in—left Paris by the ten o'clock train from the Gare du Nord."

"What! Was it—Patricia?"

"Who else? she was noticed by one of my men. He did not stop her, of course, having no instructions to do so. But he rang up and told me."

Vic could scarcely contain his excitement.

"Dubonnet, you're a little portly brick! When is the next train?"

"At twelve."

"Old fellow, will you do something for me?"

"Anything that is in my power."

"Ring up Scotland Yard. Tell them that you are speaking for me, and ask them to send a man to meet the boat at Dover. Ask them not to lose sight of Patricia at any price. Tell them I'm following by the next boat."

"Why follow?"

"Eh? There's something wrong with this telephone. I thought you said, 'Why follow?' "

"I did say 'Why follow?' "

"You did say 'Why follow?' "

"Yes."

"Why? I mean, what for? No, I don't! You know what I mean."

"Well, wouldn't it be nicer to meet the ten o'clock train when it gets in at Calais, and cross the Channel with Miss Daly? I have often heard that a sea voyage is most romantic."

"You can bet your life this one would be. But you're talking through your kepi, you old sleuth. How in heaven can I get to Calais before the ten o'clock train? It's—wait a minute—it's nearly half-past now."

"I can take it you would like to?"

"You can take anything you like of mine if you can get me there."

Dubonnet's voice seemed to convey infinite satisfaction over the wire.

"I took the liberty," he said, "as some slight token of my gratitude to you and my personal esteem, of slightly anticipating your requirements. There is waiting for you now at the Le Bourget aerodrome a pilot and machine which I have chartered for you at the expense of the Sûreté. It will get you to Calais in plenty of time. Good luck, and *bon voyage, mon vieux.*"

He rang off suddenly.

A car moves because of petrol. An engine moves because of steam. Patricia moved towards the cabin because of Victor Caryll.

"Vic! Vic! For heaven's sake! Where are you taking me?"

Vic neither delayed nor shifted his hold.

"In common with many other Englishmen," he laughed, "I have a certain shyness for registering affection in public. Can't you come more quickly, Pat, my darling? I've got a private cabin, and it has a perfectly glorious screen!"

THE END